METAPHOR IN METAMORPHOSIS: TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Focusing on the unique challenges of Chinese-to-English translation, this thesis attempts to bridge the gap between practical concerns related to readability and the cognitive structure and functions of metaphor. It explores the possibility of a compromise between the interest of the reader, the culturally-bound expressiveness of original texts, and translator interpretation.

The metaphorical difficulties that arise in the translation of two Chinese novellas, 《纸醉》 (“Paper Dreams”) by Lu Min and 《百鸟朝凤》 (“One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix”) by Xiao Jianghong, are analyzed to demonstrate how compromise can begin to take shape through the combined application of reader accessibility guidelines and cognitive theories of metaphor. Ultimately, this process reveals how each metaphor requires customized solutions and suggests that voices from various fields should be taken into consideration when transforming the literature of one tongue into an imitative product in another.

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CHAPTER I

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Much has been said on the topic of translation, and particularly the topic of translating more marginalized literatures into internationally favored languages such as English. The practice of translating into English has been praised as "an art that seeks to create understanding between cultures" (Balcom 2006: 134), for bringing diverse peoples and ideas together under a lingua franca. But the act of extending the reach of English into works of other languages has also aroused some concern. While George Steiner, one of the twentieth century's preeminent translation theorists, equates the process of translation with the original act of language production, he also seems to hold a special skepticism towards the proliferation of English, which he sees as "the principle agent in the destruction of natural linguistic diversity" (1975: 470). The issue becomes even more complicated when English is used to render literature from a source language as vastly different as Chinese. Mandarin Chinese boasts the most native speakers of any world language, enjoyed elite status in Asia for centuries, and could be similarly accused of destroying linguistic diversity within its own geographic sphere of influence. Though Chinese can hardly be considered marginal, its power relationship with the English language remains asymmetrical. Nonetheless, both Chinese literary reputation and cultural capital outside of Asia are only beginning to take shape as China strengthens its role as a key player in global economics and diplomacy, meaning that a shift in the valuation of language could be imminent. This being the case, the place where two important world languages and the widely dissimilar cultures and histories that mold and

are molded by them intersect remains a pertinent issue. It may be said that a variety of world conditions are converging so as to create a favorable period for the Chinese-to-English translator, who has previously never enjoyed such a wide variety of choice in material, such broad opportunities to push the boundaries of her craft, and such a receptive readership.

That said, it is necessary to address the extent to which the translator of a Chinese text actually has access to a general English-speaking audience. During the past decade, a small but vocal group of concerned readers in the United States and United Kingdom has decried the lack of translated literature available to consumers. For these readers, the so-called "Three Percent Problem"—that only about three percent of the books published in the U.S. are translated from non-English sources—is indicative of endemic parochialism (Kehe 2011), a trend that threatens to diminish the positive effects of globalization and emergent multicultural awareness. The three percent statistic appears even more lop-sided in light of the fact that an estimated fifty to sixty percent of published literature in other languages is translated *from* English (Wischenbart 2007). Readers of non-English literatures can vouch for the fact that this disparity does not signify a scarcity of worthy non-English writings. Moreover, certain parallel trends indicate that disinterest in other cultures may not actually explain non-English literature's pitiful underrepresentation in the American and British markets. Rüdiger Wischenbart points out that the recent success of multilingual websites, wikis and blogs, independent music labels, and international film festivals suggests that an audience for multilingual or translated material does exist. Rather, the recent demise of translation has come from within the publishing industry itself, brought about by ugly financial disagreements between translators and publishers,

marketing shortcomings that prevent translations from reaching their diverse audience members, and editors' unwillingness to give translated material the extra consideration it often requires. If this is true, then translators who are willing to exercise creativity in disseminating their work may find that their projects achieve better reception than the statistics predict.

And for the sake of encouraging even the most basic type of cross-cultural understanding, creative translation is still well worth the effort. It should be particularly relevant for speakers of a favored tongue, and especially those who reside in a "historically and geographically isolated giant" of a nation, where foreign language pedagogy almost never produces proficient second language speakers (Panetta 1999: 11). Given that it is unreasonable to expect general readers of English to invest thousands of hours in Chinese lessons in order to read a novel (not to mention the thousands of hours more required to learn enough Yoruba, ancient Greek, or Korean to compare the novel to works in those languages), most can probably agree that it is better for readers to experience a limited view of another culture through translation than to never experience that culture at all. The dazzling variety and mutability of human language itself is less accessible and pertinent to individuals than the lessons of place, time, and culture that these languages express. Despite the imperfections inherent in the process of any transmission of ideas, this is the assumption upon which contemporary translation—and specifically Chinese-to-English translation—continue to operate.

There are many ways in which language expresses and perhaps even guides the perpetuation of dissimilarities between worldviews of speakers of different languages (Holland & Quinn 1987; Achard & Klemmer 2004). Differences in English and Chinese

conceptualizations of abstract concepts such as time reflect and/or are reflected in differences in grammar, lexicon, and pragmatics. For example, while English speakers focus on time specifics as revealed by verb tense and use horizontal front/back terms to describe the past versus the future, Chinese speakers focus on change or completion as expressed through aspect or verb complement and use vertical up/down terms to understand time in a metaphorical sense (Boroditsky 2001). Translators may face challenges in capturing the intentions of different request behavior in the target language, since Chinese requests tend to be phrased more directly than English requests (Wang 2009). Moreover, translation shifts between clauses and phrases often occur because Chinese is a topic-prominent language, while English is subject-prominent (Li 1998). And while style may vary more between individual authors than between literatures as a whole, many translators have observed that Chinese writing more often makes substantial use of adjectives and other descriptive phrases in a way that might be judged as redundant or "florid" in an English literary context (Balcom 2006: 128). It is also necessary to consider the difference in the sounds that the written words represent, the particularities of which can produce puns that are often untranslatable. The Chinese logographic writing system even offers creative possibilities for word play through radicals that can only be explained by English translators through a cumbersome gloss. But metaphor stands as "the most important particular problem" of translation (Newmark 1988: 104) for all languages, and especially for two languages that have only recently begun to influence each other's conceptual systems.

As a linguistic expression, metaphor is a general term for any figurative language that draws on one cognitive domain to make sense of a more abstract conceptual domain

(Kövecses 2010: 4). As a literary device, it has two major purposes. First, through specific reference, it emphatically and succinctly clarifies certain chosen characteristics of a topic while sending other concomitant characteristics into the background. Secondly, it contributes to literary tone, imbuing whatever work it serves with additional energy, mystery, or playfulness. Traditionally, the connection between metaphor's cognitive and aesthetic purposes seems to be its implications of illusion, or more negatively, deception (Newmark 1988). This accounts for the assumption that figurative language is the logical opposite of or a deviation from more "honest" literal language, and has resulted in its unfortunate reputation during certain historical periods (Plug, n.d.). Yet metaphor is anything but illusory. In fact, metaphor is not only remarkably productive, but may also reveal truths about the way human thought is structured. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* remains one of the most informative works on metaphor to date, and indeed, offers the "most complete scenario" for the specific challenges of translating metaphor from Chinese (Fung 1995: 659). Lakoff and Johnson put forth the simple yet profound supposition that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" (1980: 3). They show how metaphorical language allows individuals to unknowingly relate both ordinary and extraordinary experiences to a network of underlying conceptual beliefs, and in turn, shapes perception. Core metaphorical concepts range from universal assumptions that arise out of environmental and physical experiences to beliefs that are bound to very specific social groups. They encompass a number of literary forms, including simile, personification, metonymy, onomatopoeia, idioms, and others. They are partially structured, such that the defined portion of the concept yields literal or

conventional metaphors, while the undefined portion yields novel metaphors. One key example the authors present is the generalized metaphorical concept THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, which allows speakers to talk about the abstract defined term (THEORIES) in terms of aspects of the more concrete defining term (BUILDINGS), employing words like "foundation" and "construct;" such usage produces literal and conventional metaphor. Meanwhile, other characteristics of buildings, such as roofs and hallways, and extensions of the building schema, such as bricks and plumbing, are not traditionally recruited to describe this metaphorical relationship. These unstructured portions of the metaphorical relationship are fertile grounds for production of imaginative metaphorical language (1980: 52-53).

If metaphor is "imaginative rationality" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 193), the means through which both the most basic and most inventive features of the human mind are expressed, then conveying its nuances should be of primary concern for any translator who values the expressive features of texts. But metaphor and its conceptual systems stand as a challenge and a "problem" simply because metaphor translatability depends on conceptual overlap across cultures (Dagut 1976: 32) and/or intercultural understanding. Lakoff and Johnson mention that overlap does not always exist, and understanding is more likely to be shaped by native language and culture than through contact with unlike cultures (1980: 24). Ali Al-Hasnawi (2007) takes this a step further in arguing that cultural specificity is significantly more common than overlap. As Mary Snell-Hornby writes, "as an abstract concept, metaphor might be universal; in its concrete realization however, being closely linked with sensuous perception and culture-bound value judgments, it is undoubtedly complicated by language-specific idiosyncrasies" (1988: 62-

63). Moreover, Gibbs' (1994) theory of the poetic mind reveals that because the metaphorical systems specific to languages shape (and confine) the way different individuals understand the world, translation is not just an act of bridging languages, but also an act of bringing together disparate modes of cognitive experience.

In fact, as a semantic tool, metaphor is not even used evenly worldwide; different languages and cultures have been shown to display diverse levels of hospitality towards figurative language (Steiner 1975). This is particularly true in the written form of language, which is often more prescriptive. The case of Chinese-to-English translation is one in which the source culture displays a higher overall valuation of figurative language. There are a number of Chinese metaphorical concepts and terms that have no equivalents in English, and vice versa. Or, in some instances, Chinese and English figurative language is structured so as to produce opposite meanings. Mary Fung (1995) offers the example of the concept of the mythical creature known as a "dragon" in English, or *long* (龙) in Chinese. In English, the dragon is a destructive, fire-breathing creature, yielding figurative speech like "dragon lady" for a dominant, cruel woman, and "entering the dragon's lair" for the act of putting oneself in harm's way. In Chinese, the *long* is a positive symbol of fortune, imperial power, and even Chinese civilization itself. It appears in common expressions like *wang zi cheng long* (望子成龙) "hoping one's son turns into a dragon," meaning to have lofty expectations for one's children, and *long fei feng wu* (龙飞凤舞) "the dragon flies and the phoenix dances" which refers to a lively and elegant artistic style. Clearly, if readers of translation wish to have a literary experience similar to that enjoyed by a native reader, they must shift their own values and accept other cultural norms when one term stands in for the other. Of course, the ability

to accomplish such a shift is contingent upon specialized knowledge of an aspect of the source culture.

There is even more at stake in the specific act of translating Chinese into English given the disturbing findings of Mary Fung and K. L. Kiu's (1987) study. Through translation analysis, Fung and Kiu determine that meaning is more often retained in translations into Chinese than from Chinese. They attribute this trend to unequal patterns of cultural contact and uneven exposure to source languages. Pellatt & Liu (2010) suggest that the shortcomings of Chinese-to-English translation are rooted in cautious prescriptivism and pedantry that arise out of the perception of insurmountable spatial and cultural distance between China and the English speaking world. Predictably, the literary products that come out of such a stilted translation tradition are bogged down by their adherence to the requirements of "ideological correctness and commercial urgency" (4). To this list of explanations, one might add a "different editorial culture" (Balcom 2006: 127) and a history of unfavorable (and arguably unfair) measurement of Chinese literary inclinations against Euro-American writing standards. Even Howard Goldblatt, one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese-to-English translators, disparages P.R.C. writers for what he interprets as ubiquitous lack of technical skill, suggesting that even entertaining or thoughtful Chinese stories suffer from sub-par artistry (Goldblatt 2000). It is no surprise that translators fail to adequately express the figurative meanings from a literature of which they are broadly critical, which is produced by authors whose artistic inclinations they do not wholly respect or trust. Given the unequal precedence given to metaphor across cultures, it must also be mentioned that what appears unnecessarily

ornamental to a reader trained in the English tradition may actually be a reflection of the special communicative strength of the Chinese metaphorical system.

Given the apparent complexity of translation, what kinds of theories or guidelines can a translator access to produce the best result? Furthermore, what exactly should be regarded as the best result? Throughout the past century, in Chinese theoretical circles, the answers to these questions have usually depended first on whether one identifies with Yan Fu's concept of "free" translation, which requires *xin*, *da*, and *ya* (faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance), or Lu Xun's "literal" translation theory, which places stock in *xin* and *shun* (faithfulness and smoothness), and secondly on the order of importance one assigns to the principles laid out by those two theorists (Lu 1959). European and American translation theory divides translation types along similar "free" versus "literal" lines, though the typology can become convoluted. Issues of text type, readership, and purpose aside, Peter Newmark (1988) defines different translation types along a continuum that spans from complete regard for accurate representation of the source language (literal) to primary interest in target language expressiveness (free). He places word-for-word, literal, faithful, and semantic translation types on the source language side of the spectrum, and places adaptation, free, idiomatic, and communicative translation on the target language side. In order to understand the general distinctions between these types and how they present themselves in translations of Chinese, it is instructive to turn to an example furnished by Parker Po-Fei Huang (1989), which compares translations of a few lines of the *Shi Jing* poem "East Gate." In his article, "On Translation of Chinese Poetry," Huang gathers these texts to comment on variations in translation across time and discipline, differentiating the objectives of scholars from those

of poets in a general way. In this discussion, the distinction of importance is between different choices of translation method and the effects these choices have on metaphorical expression in the target language. The lines are as follows:

Original:

出其東門、有女如雲。
雖則如雲、匪我思存。
縞衣綦巾、聊樂我員。

Translation by Bernard Karlgren:

I go out at the East gate;
there are girls (numerous) like a cloud;
but although they are like a cloud,
they are not those in whom my thoughts rest;
(she with) the white-silk robe and with the
black-mottled grey kerchief,
she will rejoice me.

Translation by James Legge:

I went out at the east gate,
Where the girls were in clouds.
Although they are like clouds,
It is not on them that my thoughts rest.
She in the thin white silk, and the grey coiffure,—
She is my joy!

Translation by Ezra Pound:

At the great gate to the East
Mix crowds
be girls like clouds
who cloud not my thought in the least
gray scarf and a plain silk gown
I take delight in one alone.

None of these translations can be considered word-for-word or literal, but by Newmark's definition, Karlgren's work could qualify as faithful translation. It maintains some semblance of the original poem's meter and makes few aesthetic concessions to target

language readers in terms of diction and grammar. The words in parentheses serve as intra-textual glosses; the first explains the intention of the metaphorical language that follows, and the latter compensates for Chinese zero-anaphora, providing the pronoun English readers require for comprehension purposes. While Kalgren's version may seem most reflective of the letter of the original text, it is also the least poetic, most stilted of the three translations. It might be said that this translation is most informative to a scholar with some knowledge of Chinese language, but would fall flat for a creative writer or a poetry enthusiast.

On the other hand, James Legge's version of the poem could be labeled as an illustration of semantic translation. Legge is still fairly true to the form of the original poem, but he adds additional target language information in the form of tense in the first line, plurality in the second and third lines, and pronouns in the final two lines. He also seems to take more liberties with dramatic word choice and punctuation. He appears more concerned with presenting the text as poetry in a way that would be recognizable to a general English-speaking audience, but still acceptable to a bilingual reader.

While Karlgren and Legge's translations both attempt to preserve some of the source language formal elements of "East Gate," Ezra Pound's translation falls well within the territory of target language preference. It is best regarded as an adaptation, especially since Pound himself could not read Chinese and produced his translations based on another author's notes. Besides eschewing the original poetic form, Pound's work displays rhyme, word play, and description where the source text has none. Parker Po-Fei Huang notes that Pound's translation is "a unique creation" and "excellent poetry" (93); that it is the liveliest and most aurally pleasant of the three English versions seems

clear. This is arguably the version most suitable for the same creative writers and poetry enthusiasts that Karlgren's staid translation would alienate.

Despite the aesthetic appeal of adaptations like Ezra Pound's, the value of translation in the form of adaptation is limited to only the most creative of literary project types, as it only really provides an impressionistic sketch of the source content. It is only under rare artistic conditions that that which is actually written in the original language does not matter too much. In most situations in which a translation is commissioned or freely undertaken based on the perceived value of the original text, more detailed information is expected. As Peter Newmark remarks, "only semantic and communicative translation fulfill the two main aims of translation, which are first, accuracy, and second, economy" (47). As semantic translation is concerned with both the linguistic and stylistic particularities of the text, it is this method that is likely to be of most interest to those translating literature for general purposes. While James Legge's translation deals with an ancient Chinese text and is well over a century old itself, it still represents a healthy middle ground and can prove instructive to contemporary translators. It accomplishes the goal of elucidating the particular genius of its original while respecting the needs and wishes of English-language readers.

Karlgren, Legge, and Pound's different treatments of the central CROWDS ARE CLOUDS metaphor in "East Gate" are worth noticing in that they clearly illustrate the variable of translator choice in the practice of translating figurative language. As aforementioned, Karlgren's rendering is most clinical. He translates "如" literally as "like" in both lines two and three so as to produce similes. He also feels the need to explain that the desired semantic connection between a group of girls and clouds is one of

impressive quantity. Perhaps he does not trust his readers to comprehend metaphor that relates humans to landscape elements, as such comparisons are more entrenched in the metaphorical system of Chinese than in that of English. Legge translates "如" differently in lines two and three, the first as "in" and the second as "like." This decision is almost certainly stylistic rather than semantic. By varying diction in the two lines, Legge avoids a redundancy that is sometimes rather unappealing in English. Yet Legge is more faithful to the metaphorical intent of the original text than Karlgren in the sense that he leaves the CROWDS ARE CLOUDS linkage to the reader's imagination. In Pound's rendering of the poem, the girls and clouds move to lines three and four, where they prove quite productive in the target language. Pound cleverly invents a way of punning on the English-specific noun and verb forms of the word "cloud." He also makes use of metonymy in the fifth line to circumvent the problem of translating a zero pronoun. Through all of these measures, he expresses the essential meaning and tone of the source text in a way that may be less authentic but is more aesthetically attractive and "poetic" to his audience.

In actuality, CROWDS ARE CLOUDS does not represent an especially sophisticated metaphorical connection. With the help of context clues, the construction can be deciphered with little difficulty in both the original text and its translated permutations. Clearly, there are much greater challenges than this, especially when the metaphorical connection is strong in one culture and tenuous or unknown in the other.

In response to the variability of transmission difficulty, Peter Newmark (1985) proposes a systematic, hierarchical set of procedures for metaphor translation. He suggests that, in an ideal situation, a translator should always seek to reproduce the

metaphorical image from the source language in the target language. However, if this is impossible for reasons related to target language logic or aesthetics, the translator should attempt the following, in descending order of preference: 1) replace the metaphorical image in the source language with a standard target language image; 2) translate the metaphor using simile (assuming that the metaphor is not already in simile form); 3) translate the metaphor as simile plus "sense" in the form of supplementary information within the text, glosses, endnotes, et cetera; 4) convert the metaphor to "sense"; 5) modify the metaphor; 6) delete the metaphor; 7) reproduce the same metaphor combined with "sense".

While Newmark's practical, orderly procedures may appeal to reason, their major deficiency arises from the tired underlying assumption that a metaphor is a non-essential ornament that can be handled in isolation from the larger literary text, rather than an organic outcropping of the logic of the text and the culture through which it is formed. In response to this insufficiency, Newmark's procedures have been countered by more culturally-sensitive cognitive approaches that analyze metaphor through the theories of Lakoff and Johnson. For example, Ali Al-Hasnawi (2007) suggests that good metaphor translation depends on the fulfillment of two conditions: "first, the translator must understand the way in which receptive readers perceive the world and structure their experience. Second, he must also try his best to find a way to accommodate his text to the experience of the target-language reader, and to the way it is recoded in the TL." Yet the issue here is that, while Al-Hasnawi accurately outlines instances of similar and different metaphorical mapping conditions across cultures (in this case, Arabic-speaking and English-speaking), the necessary translation conditions he identifies describe attitude and

thought process, not action. His concrete suggestion for how to approach the more problematic situation of different metaphorical mapping conditions in the source and target languages is rather weak and imprecise; he simply urges translators to include the original source metaphor and explicate it within the main body of the text "provided that [the explication] does not unduly interrupt the flow of the text." Footnotes and direct transference of culturally-bound terms are also advocated by proponents of cognitive translation (Ordudari 2007; Crerar-Bromelow 2008). Ironically, these choices are reflected in Newmark's seventh, last-ditch procedure, considered undesirable because they appear neither economical nor graceful when encountered by the readership. It might be said that if Newmark's metaphor translation technique features form without substance, then the cognitive translation theorists' techniques are characterized by substance without form.

This project attempts to bridge the gap between the practical goals of metaphor translation as outlined by Newmark and the cognitive structure and functions of metaphor as explored by Lakoff and Johnson. In other words, it seeks a compromise between reader interests and the culturally-bound expressiveness of the original text. It pilots a metaphor translation technique that involves 1) analysis of culture-specific Chinese metaphors in terms of their cognitive systematicity; 2) matching the metaphor with multiple related ideas in English based on its cognitive root and; 3) selecting from those related ideas based on Newmark's principles (which are treated more as a list of possibilities rather than as an absolute hierarchy) so as to maximize readability. It provides translators with a way of organizing and analyzing all of the target language

possibilities that adhere to the basic metaphorical concept in the source language before making a choice informed by practicalities of readership and publishing.

The metaphorical difficulties that arise in the translation of two Chinese novellas into English will serve to demonstrate how such a technique could be applied. To avoid the separate issue of temporal language change, stories that were published in the P.R.C. within the past five years and feature contemporary settings were selected. The two novellas are 《纸醉》 ("Paper Dreams") by Lu Min and 《百鸟朝凤》 ("One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix") by Xiao Jianghong. This project does not seek to make any explicit claims about the literary merits of the featured literary works. These two novellas were chosen for analysis because they feature parallel topics and themes that were deemed likely to yield numerous and colorful metaphors, including artistic pursuits, local landscapes, folk customs, grief, childhood memory, interpersonal relationships, and modernization. The target audience for translations of these works is assumed to be non-academic, meaning that the primary purposes of literary enjoyment and cultural education should take precedence.

Metaphors with Culture-Specific References

The types of metaphors discussed in this section are arguably those for which creative writing is most well-known. Or, it might be said that they are paradigmatic metaphors, those that mainstream readers are most likely to consciously recognize for their comparative qualities and their inventiveness. They are essentially extended descriptions of one thing in terms of another. They create connections that draw together different semantic domains. As such, the possibility of making a metaphor

comprehensible in translation hinges upon whether or not the metaphor's source image carries overlapping meanings in the two languages. This section examines a number of Chinese metaphors that feature source images lacking equivalents in English and outlines ways in which graceful translation might be made possible. "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" and "Paper Dreams" both prove to be rich sources for these types of metaphors, possibly because they feature settings with decidedly "traditional" flavor in opposition to the encroaching marketization and genericization of a contemporary urban landscape.

In this discussion, it is necessary to distinguish between conventional and novel metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson, conventional metaphors make use of a well-known (though often culture-specific) underlying metaphorical structure. They play off of the basic kinds of metaphors that people use to discuss everyday experiences. As such, some are so entrenched in a language that they cease to be immediately recognized as metaphorical when produced and processed. Novel metaphors can be formed from an unused portion of a conventional metaphorical system or from a new pattern of mapping (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 53). Or, to explain them in another way, novel metaphors are characterized by recognizable conceptual contrast and anomalous grammar or use in context (Soria Clivillés & Romero González 1997). Really, novel and conventional metaphors might be understood as the two opposite ends of a path along which literal terms move, unidirectionally, from offering an obscure comparison to splitting into polysemes (Bowdle & Gentner 1999). The distinction between conventional and novel metaphor does not necessarily reflect translation difficulty; the "conventionality" of a metaphor does not always correlate with its breadth of use across languages and cultures.

Rather, the distinction is important in determining how a metaphor is intended to be read by a native speaker of the source language. Cognitive studies have determined that, for native speakers of a language, novel metaphors draw more notice and require more mental processing time than conventional metaphors (Lai, Curran & Menn, 2009). In terms of response time, participants reacted to novel metaphors much as they would react to any anomaly within language, such as surprising or unusual diction. These findings fit with the general understanding that novel metaphors purposely require readers to pause and contemplate the connections between the source image and the referent; such exceptional figurative language is deliberately employed by authors for this purpose. Thus, if a metaphor can be identified as fairly conventional within its original language, then it can be assumed that the writer has less intention of provoking surprise or curiosity in the reader. If it is highly unique, then it is meant to slow reading pace and inspire thought. Ideally, these different responses to varying levels of metaphor abstruseness might be mirrored in translation to offer a more authentic, expansive literary experience.

In "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix", the main character describes the painful process of dragging himself out of bed before dawn at the behest of the master to whom he is apprenticed. He claims:

我心里头就上来了一个怨气 [1]

This is a poignant scene, in the sense that most readers can personally relate to the interplay of physical and mental discomfort involved in waking up far too early. However, this seemingly simple statement contains two figurative concepts that are of

[1] Xiao, J. (2010). Bai niao chao feng. In Ji, L. (Ed.), *2009 Zhongguo xiaoshuo paihang bang* (p. 246). Beijing: Beijing gongye daxue chubanshe.

importance to the translator. The first issue to consider is how to produce the most informative treatment of “怨气” in English. The term as a whole might be translated as “irritation” or “resentment”. However, such renderings fail to capture the nuances of the compound word’s constituent parts. “怨” is simple enough, but “气” implies the visualization of emotional expression as rising air or vapor. “气” is also tied to Daoist conceptualizations of life force and health, and is believed to take different forms within various organs of the body.

The concept of “气” is exceptionally intricate and cannot be described in adequate detail within this study. The term’s use raises the question of whether or not sincere philosophical beliefs can or should be treated as metaphorical. In this instance, it can be argued that the language is sufficiently removed from its philosophical underpinnings such that it need not be treated literally. On the other hand, the fact that the metaphor presents itself within a compound word (and a number of conceptually-related Chinese words, such as 生气，脾气， 客气， et cetera) means that it is extremely conventional, unlikely to be singled out by the native Chinese reader as thought-provoking or anomalous. However, the inclusion of the directional complement “上来”, “to come up”, means that the figurative image of emotion as rising vapor should perhaps somehow be transmitted in translation.

Lakoff and Kövecses (1987) would surely connect “气” with the underlying metaphorical conceptualization of emotion as heated water within a container. In other words, a “怨气” that would involuntarily “上来” from one’s insides is like steam escaping from a kettle; as heat and pressure build up, it cannot be contained, and thus,

bursts upward and outward into the surrounding environment. Fortunately, native English speakers also have access to permutations of this basic image from their own language, especially when the featured emotion is anger or annoyance. For example, English speakers are likely to speak of an irritated individual as “fired up”, “steaming up”, “boiling with anger” or, in extreme cases, “exploding”. In this situation, due to parallels in Chinese and English metaphorical systems, it is reasonable to follow Newmark’s preferred technique and replace the metaphorical image in the source language with a nearly equivalent image in the target language. Underlying reference to Chinese medical theory and Daoism will be mostly lost, but this is justified by the fact that the source language image is highly conventional and should not explicitly alert the reader to complicated allusions.

The second related translation challenge involves the imagining of particular organs as the site of or container for the specific feelings that can issue forth as liquids or gasses. This conceptual framework is certainly not alien to speakers of other languages, and is likely rooted in physical responses to various emotional situations, such as racing pulse, nausea, sweating, muscular tension, shortness of breath, hormonal secretions, and so on (Cannon 1929). But cultural specificity does arise in the philosophical and aesthetic particularities of how these connections are envisioned, as “the experiential basis of conceptual metaphors is both bodily and cultural” (Yu 2007: 30). In languages that are influenced by Greco-Roman thought, humoralism sometimes lays the groundwork for emotional metaphor. Likewise, Chinese conceptualizations may be related to Daoist Five Phases symbolism and its application to Chinese medical theory. The general notion is that each organ has a particular function, which reinforces and is

reinforced by other organs. Physical and mental distress results from an improper exchange between the organs, often in which one organ is producing too much or too little of its specific form of energy. In the case of the phrase under discussion, the organ of concern is the heart, or "心", a *yin*-oriented organ that is associated with the Five Phases element of fire, responsible for creating and storing vital 气 energy, and the seat of the human mind and soul, the ruler of the body (Yu 2007). Strictly speaking, the heart is viewed as connected to the emotion of passion, and particularly happiness. The resentment described in this image could be seen as a form of excess the "fire" of passion produced in the heart, but the fit is imperfect. Within the Five Phases model, passionate feelings of discontent are more commonly conceptualized as a result of overproduction of energy in the liver/gall bladder system or underproduction in the spleen.

Another possibility is that the use of "心" could be attributed to the influence of non-Chinese literary conventions. In a significant portion of European literature (and particularly English literature), the heart takes on broad figurative significance (Kövecses 1986), whereas organs like the spleen and liver are almost never singled out for inclusion in the conceptual system describing physical origins for emotion (Sharifian 2008). Thus, texts translated *into* Chinese may have encouraged the expanded influence of heart imagery in Chinese literature. The irony here is that, if the above metaphor is accepted as an example of how metaphorical change and generalization can occur through intercultural borrowings, a curious disconnect becomes apparent: the figurative association between the heart and instinctive feelings of irritation as outlined in this phrase is somewhat unusual in English. In English, the "bowels" or "guts" (i.e. the digestive system) are more commonly conceptualized as the source of negative primeval

(but non-sexual) feelings, such as shock, disgust, suspicion, fear, and irritation. The English language framework may be said to reflect another basic underlying metaphorical concept: UP is GOOD. In line with Enlightenment and Christian thought, any feeling that is seen as connected to rational thinking, sincerity, or noble passion (GOOD) is associated with the brain or the heart, organs situated in the upper half of a standing body (UP). Meanwhile, base desires like lust, hunger, fear, and superstition, which are deemed sinful, are conceptually situated in organs in the lower half of the body. This may explain why an English speaker might find it unnatural to describe irritation about being roused from sleep as coming from the heart.

Therefore, a translator might find it useful to maintain the image of a feeling as substance rising from an organ, but also change the organ to reflect metaphorical expectations in the target language. A possible translation would be:

A feeling of resentment rose from my gut.

This is another example of how to carry out one of Newmark's preferred translation methods, as the translation more or less keeps the figurative meaning of the original intact, but draws from parallel sources of metaphor in the target language.

Lu Min's novella "Paper Dreams" is equally rich in metaphor. Early in the story, the author describes villagers' collective reaction to strong differences in the personalities of two brothers. She writes that, when thinking about the dissimilarities, the villagers:

朦朦胧胧地体味到一些关于人生际遇之类的东西[2]

[2] Lu, M. (2009). Zhi zui. In Pang, J. (Ed.), *2008 Zhongguo niandu zhongpian xiaoshuo* (p. 62). Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe.

This image is quite complex. The first metaphorical challenge here is the adverbial form of “朦胧”. The term literally refers to haziness or mistiness, especially under dim, moonlit conditions (as the moon radical suggests). By extension, it is connected to an underlying metaphorical construct in which physical darkness is associated with a lack of mental clarity. The act of seeing is equated with the act of understanding, such that obstructed vision means obstructed knowledge. Thus, much like the related figurative phrase, “一头雾水”, “朦胧” implies that an idea or sensation is vague, obscure, or otherwise unclear. English words such as “hazily”, “dimly”, “darkly”, and “nebulously” function similarly, in that they can be used to describe both environmental and perceptual conditions. In this circumstance, English and Chinese undoubtedly share a metaphorical system.

The use of the verb “体味” introduces an image that makes use of the special figurative device of rhetorical synesthesia, in which one sensory experience is described in terms of another. Synesthesia offers a unique opportunity for a literary author to connect highly unique metaphor to cognitive metaphors associated with bodily experiences (Yu 2003). Since “体味” implies relishing a taste, it produces an eating metaphor in which ideas or experiences can be savored in the same way as a flavorful dish, and taste can be experienced as obscured vision. Some researchers, such as Dilin Liu (2002) and Gang Yue (1999), have argued that Chinese is special in its broad use of eating metaphors, while others have disputed this claim on the grounds that every culture on earth simply has special metaphorical understandings about food and eating (Angus 2003; Kass 1994). The particular connection between physical perception of various tastes, such as savory, sweet, sour, and bitter, and abstract, emotionally-charged

experiences seems to support the latter argument. Moreover, it appears that tasting metaphors belong to their own category, as they operate differently from most eating metaphors. They highlight momentary aesthetic sensation, suggesting none of the "ravenousness" and "insatiability" or "chewing," "swallowing," and "digesting" of information often found in pure eating metaphors. Like Chinese, English is full of conventional metaphors in which subjects can "taste" experiences as dissimilar as success, suffering, and irony, and ultimately conclude that "variety is the spice of life." As the metaphorical connection between tasting and experiencing is extremely productive, it can result in countless novel metaphors as well.

But in this quote, what exactly are the villagers savoring? "际遇" is a fairly formal, literary word that, in this situation, most likely means "fate," which emphasizes that the two brothers under scrutiny clearly never chose to be born with different character traits. A translation of the line in a fairly faithful mode might read "hazily savoring certain things in human fate." However, in an English language context, there are a couple of small problems with this rendering: "hazily savoring" is metrically ponderous and semantically awkward, and "things" is completely unclear and inelegant. The first problem can be solved by choosing an alternative word for "朦胧" that features a different syllabic structure and downplays the obscured vision metaphor. Words like "hazily", "darkly", "dimly" and "nebulously" carry a decidedly negative connotation that fights with the image of enjoying the taste of something. A more neutral term, such as "vaguely" may prove an acceptable substitute, especially since it produces pleasing literary consonance and assonance when juxtaposed with "savoring". Its only major

disadvantage is that it sends the source word's suggestion of weather and environmental conditions into the conceptual background.

The problem of translating "东西" is much more vexing, since it is a problem of missing information. English readers may not make the connection between the differences in the two brothers and the ups and downs of fate because, as a complete idea, the act of "savoring things about fate" is not well-known in their language. Here, it may be prudent to use Newmark's third suggestion and include a type of intra-textual gloss. One fairly discreet option would be:

vaguely savoring certain ironies in human fate

The inclusion of "irony" in place of "things" clarifies that the villagers are deriving an elusive pleasure from the discovery of an unexpected natural occurrence in which two brothers are born with entirely divergent abilities and personalities. In addition, the insertion of the extra word contributes positively to the tone and artistry of the translated text; it does not draw too much attention to itself or reveal its role as a gloss.

"Paper Dreams" also features a scene in which the father of the main character describes a young male character's scholarly appearance. He particularly mentions the boy's manner of dress, focusing on:

那大鹏一样鼓着风的衬衫[3]

The appearance of "一样" immediately indicates that the above phrase is a simile, a form of metaphor that explicitly advertises its comparative qualities. The author may have found such a literary technique useful in acknowledging the vast difference in scale and grandeur of the two compared items, as the referent is a white button-down shirt, and the

[3] Lu, M. (2009: 72).

source image is a giant mythological bird. More accurately, the phrase compares the movement of the wind-tousled shirt to that of the bird on the wing. As the comparison hinges on similarity of action, it is fortuitous that both Chinese and English contain words that equate the movement of fabric and wings in the wind. In other words, “鼓着” functions quite similarly to “beating”, “flapping”, or “fluttering” (though “fluttering” is decidedly less appropriate in describing the appearance of a giant bird in flight).

The “大鹏” is largely associated with the writings of Zhuangzi and is an example of an exceedingly popular mythological image in Chinese literature that has yet to enter the general English speaker’s knowledge base. In translation, it is often referred to as a “roc”, a fierce giant bird from Middle Eastern folklore that eventually made its way into European literature during the Middle Ages (Eason 2008). However, there are numerous problems with this terminology. Firstly, the same issues arise here as with comparing the 龙 to the European dragon; the comparison highlights the similarities in the creatures’ physical characteristics, but fails to account for their different symbolic meanings. Such a technique forces a specifically Chinese concept to conform to a non-Chinese worldview. In addition, the roc does not have the same level of cultural importance in the English-speaking world as the 鹏 does in Chinese-speaking spheres; in fact, the roc and its significance may be largely unfamiliar to the majority of contemporary English readers. This being the case, it might be said that translating 鹏 as roc for an English reader is tantamount to replacing a Chinese term with an equally unrecognizable Arabic word.

In a situation such as this one, in which no equivalent word is readily available, a translator may take advantage of an opportunity to educate her readers. She may

introduce a new, borrowed term into the English lexicon in pinyin form and prompt readers to do further research if they so desire. However, this cannot be accomplished without providing some context. Thus, in the translation of the above phrase, Newmark's third principle proves instrumental once more. Here, a gloss should draw attention to the particular attribute that makes the image of the giant mythical bird most salient. Since the character's father makes the comparison between the young man's shirt and the flying bird in a moment of great awe and admiration for the boy's intellectual abilities, it is logical to capitalize on the source image's role as a symbol of power and greatness. Thus, a translation could read:

that white shirt flapping in the wind like a great, triumphant *peng* bird

The further addition of "bird" is required to help readers classify the creature and visualize the figurative connection between the shirt and its source image. Through the help of minor English language clues, the reader can make sense of the metaphor despite limited background knowledge.

In addition to situations in which the translator can expand readers' cultural knowledge, it is interesting to examine metaphors that include a culturally-specific idea that *has* already entered reader consciousness so as to be accepted as target language terminology. Some examples from the texts under scrutiny include phrases like "面子上过不去,"[4] in which the Chinese concept of the physical "face" as a metaphorical stand-in for one's social dignity is the operative term; and "伊老师， 开音父亲两个人像推手般

[4] Xiao, J. (2008: 251).

地聊着大元,”[5] a simile that is dependent on the reader’s basic familiarity with tai-chi exercises. One of the most amusing and creative metaphors of this sort appears in “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix.” It describes the main character’s master’s angry countenance:

五官也剧烈地痉挛着， 像一碗煮烂的饺子[6]

“五官,” or the five sense organs, most likely refer to the features of the subject’s face; the manner in which they convulse with rage is compared to the messy bubbling of dumplings boiled to mush. Despite the fact that the term “dumpling” can be used to describe various foods of marginal similarity from around the world, it can be safely assumed that most English-speaking readers have some awareness of the Chinese 饺子 and the cooking techniques involved in its creation, and that they would possibly recall this food in connection with a Chinese story. Even if they were to envision some other sort of “dumpling” (such as the solid dough balls most common in Anglo-American cuisine), the unfortunate results of over-boiling anything are universal enough to produce a sufficiently accurate image. The underlying metaphor is arguably the same as that discussed in reference to “怨气”, in which anger or petulance is described in terms of overheated liquid. In this simile, the presence of liquid is implied through the reference to boiling. The addition of the dumplings whose ragged and wobbly appearance has resulted from excess boiling (and, by extension, excess anger) yields a novel variation and improves the visual strength of the literary image. Moreover, the reference to overcooking a fairly common food item might be said to contribute to the mildly

[5] Lu, M. (2009: 86).

[6] Xiao, J. (2010: 286).

humorous characterization of the fictional individual it describes, conform to the novella's distinctly unpretentious "countryside" tone, and even highlight the simplicity and immaturity of the "I" narrator. As mentioned previously, both Chinese and English speakers have access to the same root metaphorical concept, making translation fairly unproblematic, as such:

All of his features quivered severely, like a pot of over-boiled dumplings.

By and large, "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" is an example of a text in which metaphor is subtly presented, yet central to the development of characters, tone, and narrative. The author uses anger as heated liquid metaphors throughout the text, as they seem to accurately capture the sense of frustration that follows the key characters throughout the narrative. For example, the narrator describes how his and his classmate's "血都滚热了,"[7] that their blood was boiling with anticipation at their first opportunity to play *suona* with their elder classmates. Or, after a fight between traditional musicians and contemporary music supporters, the scene is described as being as lively as "一锅滚热的辣油,"[8] a "pot of spicy, boiling oil." Though most of these metaphors make use of conventional images, they are so important as a whole that they might even be considered a motif, instrumental in unifying and driving the narrative to its climax.

Idioms

The main distinction between the metaphors in this section and those discussed in the previous section is that, while general metaphors may or may not make use of culture-

[7] Xiao, J. (2010: 265).

[8] Xiao, J. (2010: 282).

specific information, idioms themselves have become established aspects of culture. They are normally highly conventionalized, and therefore, not immediately recognized as metaphorical. In many cases, they are comprehended as single, discrete lexical items. They are frequently idiosyncratic, isolated from other metaphors in a language's conceptual system (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Chinese is often celebrated for its broad use of colorful idioms, which are generally divided into two categories: 成语 (*chengyu*), fixed four-character phrases that reflect classical wisdom, and 俗语 (*suyu*), folk proverbs and allusions. Idioms from both categories are notoriously difficult to translate because their comprehensibility is usually tied to a particular story, belief, or custom that is deeply embedded in Chinese culture. Moreover, English language is generally less hospitable to idiomatic language. English idioms tend to appear relatively infrequently, and are more acceptable in casual contexts and at lower registers. Zhang's (2009) comparative corpus study confirms that English speakers and writers use idioms more sparingly than their Chinese counterparts. Zhang suggests that the extended length and grammatical rigidity of English idioms may explain why they are not highly favored. It is also important to keep in mind that socio-cultural values and conditions may play a significant role in determining the relative value of a linguistic construct. Though movements to simplify and "democratize" the Chinese language have cropped up intermittently throughout the past century, judicious *chengyu* use is still often seen as a positive indicator of a Chinese writer's distinguished education and artistic sensibility. Conversely, even if English language contained extremely compact, classical, allusive idioms, it is unlikely that the implementation of such devices would be welcomed by the general literary audience. Shakespearian and Biblical

quotations may be the closest corresponding elements in English literature (Pellatt & Liu 2010), and unlike Chinese *chengyu,* they are commonly viewed as appallingly pretentious, satirical, or, at best, contextually compartmentalized. All of these issues point to the fact that English lacks a true *chengyu* equivalent in terms of form, content, and especially reader reception. This stylistic difference should have a strong impact on the rendering of idioms in translation.

Overall, the types of idioms used in "Paper Dreams" and "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" reveal a lot of information about topic and tone in the original texts. "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" uses very few *chengyu,* but is full of vibrant *suyu.* The story's dependency on *suyu* is highly strategic, contributing to the reader's sense of its unschooled characters and its modest countryside setting. As the narrator of the text is an uneducated rural youth, slang and coarse colloquialisms are to be expected, while classically-informed idioms are not. Though "Paper Dreams" also features a provincial setting, the author of this novella makes much more frequent use of a wide variety of *chengyu.* To a certain extent, this may be because her story's tone and emphasis are quite different from those of "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." The novella focuses principally on the interior life of a passionate, imaginative, somewhat tragic female character whose muteness limits the author's ability to illustrate her personality through dialogue. Given this expressive challenge, *chengyu* may be seen as an elegant way of conveying richness of emotion and exploring a sentimental theme from a third person omniscient perspective or from the position of ancillary characters. Moreover, the types of *chengyu* used to describe the principal character and her unfortunate circumstance stand in contrast to the sardonic way in which *chengyu* also

appear in relation to the character of Teacher Yi and his tedious didacticism. Thus, when translating this text, it is imperative that the translator express the difference between idioms that are sincere (and thus, in an English context, should perhaps not appear as idioms at all) and idioms that are mocking.

Moreover, within this range of *chengyu* uses, there are varying levels of cognitive overlap between Chinese idioms and English, as well as varying extents to which such an overlap can even begin to play a primary role in translation. In "Paper Dreams," some unnamed villagers proclaim that:

世上绝没有探囊取物那样的好事情[9]

"探囊取物" is an example of a *chengyu* that is relatively simple to translate. The idiom literally means "to take something out of a pocket," and implies that something is easy to obtain or achieve. The figurative image is somewhat transparent in Chinese. The metaphorical system is experiential, equating ease with physical proximity, as it compares the effortlessness of reaching for something on one's person to the ease of completing any desired action. However, it is important to remember that most idioms do not clearly highlight their metaphorical underpinnings because they are so conventional in the minds of readers. This means that metaphorical systematicity is less important in idiom translation than appropriateness of meaning and style. This being the case, it might seem that Newmark's first principle (replace the metaphorical image in the source language with a standard target language image) would work nicely in this case, that an English idioms like "a piece of cake" or "easy as pie" could stand in for the *chengyu,* despite the fact that they share no clear metaphorical connection with the original.

[9] Lu, M. (2009: 58).

However, these idiomatic English renderings present their own original problems. First, they do not match the register of "探囊取物;" they are quite informal, while the *chengyu* makes use of classical, written vocabulary. Secondly, references to "cake" and "pie" in a rural Chinese narrative makes little sense, since these baked goods would never be found in in such a setting. Moreover, Newmark's second suggestion (turning the metaphor into simile in translation) only yields awkward results, such as:

Nothing in this world is as easy as pulling something from a pocket.

The connection here is still unclear, and adding a gloss (Newmark's third suggestion) makes the statement even more unwieldy. Therefore, this is a situation in which the idiom is best expressed without drawing too much attention to its figurative nature when swapped for "sense" in the form of a literal statement:

Nothing good comes easily in this world.

Besides straightforwardness, the additional benefit of this translation is that "nothing good comes easily," while not metaphorical or historically grounded, is a set proverbial phrase in English. Its linguistic role is quite similar to that of a *chengyu.* It implies the application of time-honored, conventional wisdom to the literary situation described, and it produces a similar experience for the reader of the English version.

Within the same scene, the villagers also state:

万不可开门见山[10]

"开门见山" is more complex in its original form because its meaning is not especially transparent. Literally, it means "open the door, see the mountain," but figuratively, suggests directness in writing or speech. The cognitive connections between

[10] Lu, M. (2009: 58).

the activities of opening a door to view a scene of mountains and expressing one's thoughts directly are simplicity of action and the spatial conceptualization of an argument as a path that can either be winding or straight. However, these connections are not immediately apparent from the *chengyu* itself. This is an example of a *chengyu* with an obscure literary source; in this case, the source is Tang poetry (Wu 2006). But fortunately, English provides a satisfactory equivalent in the idiom "straight to the point":

> […] you can never go straight to the point.

With the addition of a pronoun for clarity in English, one of Newmark's preferred translation principles can be fulfilled, and the utterance remains appropriately staid and economical.

A third major type of *chengyu* lacks transparency because its figurative meaning is derived from a complicated historical or mythological story. An example comes from a passage in "Paper Dreams" in which a character is studying so diligently that he stops paying attention to the things that usually interest him, including:

> 镇上的鸡鸣狗盗[11]

"鸡鸣狗盗" literally means "chicken call, dog snatch," an amusing phrase that indicates little on its own. Its origin lies in a story from the *Shiji*, in which Lord Mengchang is able to escape to his homeland with the help of his crafty aides, who could deceive their master's adversaries by imitating the sound of a crow and disguising themselves as thieving dogs (Wu 2006). The *chengyu* itself refers to small tricks performed by people of little talent and importance, or, by extension, to the small ruckuses caused by such people. In this situation, it implies that the studious boy is too busy to take notice of

[11] Lu, M. (2009: 67).

minor small-town scandals and other such matters. Again, English offers a semantically (if not metaphorically) similar idiom, "carryings-on" which could be used in context as:

trivial carryings-on in the town

The word "trivial" is added to emphasize the inconsequential nature of small-town events. At first glance, it seems somewhat unfortunate to have to give up the colorful literal description of chickens squawking and dogs performing acts of mischief imbedded in the *chengyu*. Yet, once again, the idiom is conventional enough in the source language that the metaphorical image does not carry much weight in the original, and need not appear in a markedly "faithful" form in the translated version.

On the other hand, the vibrant descriptions in *suyu* should perhaps not be relinquished so easily, as they are often vital to the translator's expression of the original text's literary tone. Moreover, though *suyu* are also conventional, they are rarely as grammatically set as *chengyu* are, and may be subject to minor formal variation. This means that they cannot always be considered a single lexical item, and some notion of the productive underlying figurative concept may still exist. For example, in "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," the main character's father impugns him by calling him:

烂泥糊不上墙[12]

This *suyu* literally means "bad-quality mud cannot stick to a wall," conjuring an image of traditional Chinese countryside mud-and-straw construction gone awry. The implication is that the so-named individual is useless and incapable, much like mud that cannot even be used for the most basic of building purposes. Besides the fact that that the *suyu* is meant as a colorful insult, the fact that its verb is flexible suggests that the idiom's

[12] Xiao, J. (2010: 261).

metaphorical image is not entirely lost within its rigid lexical meaning. In this particular saying, the 糊 "to stick/paste" is interchangeable with the verb 扶 "to hold up." The verb chosen depends only on the preference of the speaker and/or the common form in his or her social sphere. Because Chinese speakers may still have some access to the underlying metaphor governing this idiom, it is beneficial to attempt to preserve as much of the figurative image as possible. But, as the metaphor does not have a close counterpart in English, the best way to draw attention to its metaphorical nature in translation might be to rephrase it as a simile:

[you're] like lousy mud paste that won't even stick to a wall.

Even if the exact image of building a traditional wall is not entirely clear to readers of the translation and the phrase does not read as an idiom, that the metaphorical connection is lack of stick-to-itiveness and utility is clear enough. Translation of 烂 as "lousy" also serves to highlight this, as well as the informality of the dialogue of which it is an important part. Maintaining some semblance of the original figurative image helps to preserve the mildly humorous tone of the passage.

Another flexible (and somewhat crude) *suyu* appears in both translated texts:

三棍子打不出一个闷屁[13]
十棍子敲不出一个屁[14]

Literally, the phrase means to "beat X amount of times and still cannot get out a fart;" it describes an individual who is so reticent that even after being approached several times, will still not converse or reveal desired information to the interlocutor. This is a metaphor

[13] Lu, M. (2009: 62).

[14] Xiao, J. (2010: 274).

in which abstract social exchange is explained using an image that is deeply rooted in the workings of physical bodies. Physical discomfort is compared to social discomfort; that talking to shy individuals is compared to beating them suggests that the act of communication is painful and ineffective. Meanwhile, the metaphorical use of "fart" suggests some perceived similarities between speech and flatulence, as both are types of sounds that humans can produce. A fart is a sound with minimal communicative purpose, and as such, is a hyperbolic rendering of the act of engaging in even the tiniest, crudest social (or even antisocial) exchange. There is a minor difference in style and intensity in the versions from the two texts, which is expressed through different numbers of "beatings" (three as opposed to ten) and different descriptive adjectives (a muffled fart as opposed to just a simple fart). These variances are related to aesthetic effect, and reveal that the metaphorical nature of the idiom is still at least somewhat prominent in the minds of its users.

Though English may idiomatically describe a painful social exchange as the violent act of "pulling teeth" (which, like the Chinese idiom, is probably related to the underlying metaphorical system ARGUMENT IS WAR) or describe a shy person as a "wallflower" or a "shrinking violet," none of these items quite approximates the attempt at beating out a fart with a stick, for a number of obvious reasons. Mainly, they lack the completeness of the idea of such a strained social exchange, and they do not capture the coarse comicality of the description. Yet, the Chinese idiom is almost too explicit to be translated directly in a smooth way; English readers are sure to wonder why the number of beatings is specified and whether this certain number has any significance. The fact that the number of beatings varies in different uses of the *suyu* but has no bearing on what

comes before or after the idiom suggests that the number is not especially important. It is merely included for dramatic effect. Thus, the translator can simply edit out that detail and add a gloss if necessary, depending on context. For example, the translator might write:

> He's usually a quiet kind of kid; you can't even beat a fart out of him, and he plays his *suona* as loud as a whisper!
>
> Dayuan, to use Tumba residents' coarse analogy, was so mild and awkward that one couldn't even beat a muffled fart out of him.

In the first example, the specific reference to "ten" beatings is removed, and "quiet" is added to direct the reader to the idea that "beating" is being compared to the frustrating process of communicating with an extremely introverted individual. In the second example, the original text provides the descriptions "mild and awkward," so that the translator's only significant intervention involves adding the pronoun "one" and, once again, removing the specific number of beatings. From the perspective of the translator, another benefit of the second example is that it overtly presents the idiom as a "coarse analogy," making it much easier for readers to understand and directly appreciate its figurative nature and its communicative status within the source language.

But in some cases, context requires a different treatment of *suyu.* An illustrative example comes from "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," in which the main character's master warns him about the dangers of greed:

> 人心不足蛇吞象[15]

This *suyu* is much more grammatically fixed than the two previous examples. This may be because, while it is a popular and somewhat whimsical proverb, it makes use of formal

[15] Xiao, J. (2010: 276).

language and can be traced back to ancient texts like the *Shan Hai Jing* and *Tian Wen.* It might even be said to exist somewhere between a true *suyu* and a true *chengyu.* The metaphor itself is rather easy to comprehend; the first portion of the statement sets up the figurative volta at the end, telling the reader "[when] the human heart is not satisfied, the snake will swallow an elephant," illustrating the workings of desire and its relationship to boundless greed. With its customary explanation attached, this metaphor is not difficult for English readers to understand, especially since their language contains idioms explaining greed in terms of comparison of magnitude ("give him an inch and he'll take a mile") and in terms of eating/containment ("bite off more than one can chew," "his eyes are bigger than his stomach"). It may seem that an explanatory simile translation like "When a man's heart is not satisfied, he becomes as greedy as a snake swallowing an elephant" would be sufficient in this case. However, this kind of translation loses the compactness of the original idiom. This may not be problematic in certain textual situations, but is inappropriate here because it conflicts with the characterization of the speaker. Within "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," the main character's master is repeatedly described as extremely taciturn and direct; lengthy or overly expressive dialogue would seem unnatural from him. Because of this detail, it may be necessary to delete the metaphor altogether, or rather, replace it with a cognitively unrelated English fixed phrase, as is often required with *chengyu.* The desired effects can be achieved through use of an economical, concrete proverb:

Greed knows no limits!

This brief section only begins to reveal how figurative sources of idiomatic language range as broadly as the fancies of the human imagination. Nonetheless, the

intricacy of *chengyu*, *suyu*, and their translation into English should effectively problematize the notion of idioms as "dead metaphors" that have little or nothing to offer in terms of creative expression. Rather, the challenges presented by relatively fixed items like idioms can successfully alert translators to the complex metaphorical facets of linguistic elements that are not immediately recognized for their figurative qualities. Two such elements, onomatopoeia and proper names, will be explored in the following chapters.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is an oft-neglected subset of figurative language in which the phonological structure of a word appears as a playful imitation of sound. Strictly speaking, an onomatopoetic word is one that "is considered by convention to be acoustically similar to the sound, or the sound produced by the thing to which it refers" (Pharies 1979: 84). It is of particular interest in this study due to the high incidence of onomatopoetic words in the two Chinese texts under discussion, particularly "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." Though relatively little scholarly writing has been dedicated to these so-called "second class citizens among words" (Anderson 1998: 129) and the body of literature on Chinese echoic language may be best described as "predominantly descriptive, […] fragmentary and impressionistic" (Mok 2001: 17), onomatopoeia in both Chinese and human language in general can be conceptualized in widely different ways.

It is possible to view onomatopoeia as an example of how the sounds of language are iconic, drawn from a source in nature or human experience. This interpretation is in direct conflict with Saussure's supposition that the relationship between the signifier and

signified is always arbitrary, but fits nicely with Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive metaphorical theories. LaPolla (1994), whose study on Chinese indicated a cross-linguistic understanding of acute segments with meanings related to smallness and grave segments with meanings related to largeness, theorizes a broad, evolutionary basis for pitch differentiation. He points to the fact that low vocalizations are used to display power while high frequencies are used to express submission throughout the animal kingdom and suggests that all human languages reflect this primordial system of meaning. Contemporary research also suggests a possible evolutionary basis for this phenomenon. Adult humans display the distinct adaptation of a descended larynx, which allows individuals to make quick and extreme changes in vocal frequency while providing listeners with clues regarding the physical size of the speaker (Fitch 2010). Alternately, Hu (2011) presents the iconicity argument against the specific backdrop of a Chinese literary heritage that was generally welcoming to iconic understandings of language, highlighting the ways in which Chinese words that are close in sound are often related in both meaning and written form. He then points out some specifics. He writes that, for words representing the sound of one thing hitting another, Chinese tends to favor onomatopoeia beginning with plosive consonants, and reduplication is used to express repeated or complex sounds. He also mentions phonaesthetic iconicity, a phenomenon related to kinesthesia, in which the physical acts of producing certain sounds derive value from metaphor of physical orientation, affecting the meaning of the words they compose. For example, the vowel in 大 (big) requires the speaker to open her mouth wide to produce the proper sound, metaphorically suggesting something that is big, high, loud, or pleasant; whereas 小 (small) is made with a more closed mouth, thus implying something

small, low, quiet, or undesirable. Certain consonants may also express a particular meaning. The same can be argued regarding tone, where words with opposite meanings seem to express ordinal value through the tone used (where fourth tone takes precedence, followed by first, second, and third). Hu claims that both onomatopoeia and phonaesthetic iconicity speak for themselves in proving that Chinese language developed naturally out of the way people experience and synthesize knowledge of the physical world.

Hu does an admirable job of arguing against the notion that language (and onomatopoeia in particular) is arbitrary and encouraging linguists to look beyond European languages before making such an assumption. However, many of his limited examples from Chinese language are clearly cherry-picked to prove his point, and can be easily countered with numerous words and antonyms that do not fit with the sound and tone value rules he touts. A much larger language sample is needed if he wishes to render his ideas more plausible. Additionally, the fact that Chinese scholars have shown interest in iconicity in language does not necessarily explain how Chinese language was first developed, and cannot fully account for historical language change or regional variation. And to conclude that onomatopoeia speaks for itself is somewhat simplistic, especially in light of the fact that sound symbolism varies across languages and dialects and often cannot be comprehended out of context. If onomatopoeia speaks for itself, then it would be expected to present itself in the same way in all languages at all points in history. It might even be expected that humans would not have to learn onomatopoeia from each other, as they could simply go out into the world and learn to imitate the sounds of bees, dogs, and pigs, just as their distant ancestors must have done when they invented

language. And yet, this is not known to occur; even the most realistic imitations of animal sounds are not considered acceptable as *language* per se. Learning onomatopoeia from a caregiver is an early childhood rite of passage, during which children learn to mimic and perceive natural sound through the standard echoic terms made possible by the particular phonemic conditions of their mother tongues (Anderson 1998). Thus, the English-speaking child imitates *buzz*, *bow-wow*, and *oink-oink*, while the Chinese-speaking child memorizes the slight but crucial differences between *weng-weng*, *wang-wang*, and *heng-heng*.

With these considerations in mind, Bredin (1996) offers a near-opposite assessment. He claims that onomatopoetic words are, in fact, arbitrary, not only because language is a conventionalized system, but also because of the limitations of the phonemes that exist within a given language. Therefore, a word must be understood to denote a sound *before* it can be experienced as onomatopoeia, which, in turn, operates through the human desire to create cognitive connections whenever possible. The difference between the English words *pow* and *cow* illustrate how this might work. *Pow* is known to be onomatopoetic, while *cow* is not, despite the fact that both words share common vowels and the kinds of plosive consonants that might be considered sonically representative of one thing hitting another. The only plausible difference is that the former word has been designated as onomatopoeia, defines a concept related to sound, and thus, explicitly invites speakers to attempt to rationalize its sound as representing a sonic event. Arguably, this explanation would make even more sense in a Mandarin Chinese context, as Chinese features fewer acceptable phonemic combinations than English does. After all, while Chinese speakers surely experience 汪 as onomatopoetic,

they would hardly perceive 旺, 王, 网, or 忘 as such without expending a lot of imaginative energy. It is also for these reasons that Bredin argues that onomatopoeia and general sound symbolism (which Hu defines as phonaesthetic iconicity) must be separated, as "onomatopoeia is a relation of sound to sound" while "sound symbolism is a relation of sound to semantic fields such as brightness and darkness" (568). Sound symbolism still requires much more research before it can be declared universal across languages, or even shown to adhere to a consistent rule within one language. Conversely, onomatopoeia has the potential to appear in any language whenever there is a need for rich description of sound.

Hu and Bredin's hypotheses do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. It is known that language does not simply come into being in an instant. Languages evolve by adding features from multiple sources over time, be they the sounds of the natural world, the languages of influential neighbors, or the impositions of a particular social class or political establishment. They also lose unfavorable or unnecessary features (McMahon 1994). As a very basic element of communication, onomatopoeia could have multiple routes of entry into any given language. It also seems that selection of echoic words is arbitrary to a point, but restricted to a certain realm of possibilities. There must be a set of rules determined by the length, pitch, and timbre of the echoed sound itself; such rules may very well share certain similarities across languages, as Bladon's (1977) cross-linguistic study suggests. There are also pre-existing onomatopoetic conventions within each language. For example, one might have little difficulty introducing a novel echoic word like *prash* into the English lexicon as long as it indicates the sound of two things colliding because a) the monosyllabic nature of the word indicates the length and

complexity of the sound (as Hu would argue), b) plosives are theorized to universally suggest a sound with an abrupt onset, while fricatives indicate a sound that does not end abruptly or breaks into fragments (Bladon 1977), plus c) pre-existing onomatopoetic words like *crash*, *bash*, and *smash* set a semantic precedent that makes the phonetically-related word's meaning seem logical as part of the English cognitive system.

Because onomatopoeia is so flexible and so resistant to explanation in itself, it is difficult to pin down exactly how it should be translated. Like other types of figurative language, it exhibits a certain amount of overlap in English and Chinese, but most terms are not seamless equivalents or are particular to each language. However, it does not matter as much how an onomatopoetic term is translated in isolation; its role as a rhetorical device means that the tone and context that it supports are of more importance that the word itself. Of course, a translator should aim to maintain original meaning as much as possible (the equivalent of a *swish* should probably not be replaced with a *thump*), but ultimately, onomatopoeia presents a stylistic choice in which naturalness should be considered.

In seeking to produce a guide to translating onomatopoeia from Chinese to English, Yu (1995) suggests that the most important consideration should be the part of speech/grammatical function of the echoic word. In other words, onomatopoeia used as verbs in the original should ideally be translated into equivalent verbs, attributes should be translated into attributes, and so on. The translator should only change the part of speech if absolutely necessary. Even less desirable is changing an echoic word into a non-echoic word or adding an echoic word where one does not exist in the original. Finally, Yu suggests that in cases where there is no matching word in English, it may be

necessary to coin new onomatopoeia. In certain situations, this can be accomplished by simply transcribing pinyin; the translator must simply consider comprehensibility. Though Yu places this option last on his list, its expressive possibilities should not be discounted. As Anderson (1998) points out, onomatopoetic neologisms have enjoyed a long and productive history in expressive English texts, and very often contribute to the vibrancy and novelty of the texts they support. Because onomatopoeia is so context-based, there are many situations in which readers of translation can comprehend a new onomatopoetic term based on its use alone. No gloss is necessary, as onomatopoeia is simple and transitory. It is read quickly and impacts the reader's perception of literary tone before being forgotten. The benefit of this transfer technique is that more of the original text remains intact. The new term may create a mild sense of alienation for the reader that serves to remind her that she is reading a text in translation, in which characters speak and think in another language. Some translators may find this type of authorial intervention desirable, while others may not.

In "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" and "Paper Dreams," a small portion of the onomatopoetic terms used can be translated into English without serious mishap. One example comes from a scene in "Paper Dreams" in which a film crew stages an interview with the main character. Their actions are described as:

就啪啪打开那些黑洞洞的家伙， 一起围着开音了[16]

Context tells the translator that here, the onomatopoetic term functions either as an inserted sound element or as an adverb describing the sound of camera cases being unlatched. The challenge is then to determine which English echoic term best describes

[16] Lu, M. (2009: 79).

the sound of clasps when they are opened with a sense of urgency. Some possibilities include *snap, click, plink, ping,* and *pop.* If all of these target language possibilities are more or less equal in their appropriateness and expressiveness, then the translator might attempt to preserve some of the aural qualities of the source text term. Thus, if 啪 is pronounced "*pa*," then the closest phonetically-related English term might be "pop," which could be employed in translation as follows:

> […] then *pop, pop!* opened the cases of their black filming tools, and all circled around Kaiyin.

Sentence structure and the part of speech of the echoic word remain fairly unchanged in this new version, while the sound of the English onomatopoeia creates similar atmospheric effects when compared to the original.

Another relatively straightforward example comes from "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," where the main character's classmate is described making an exaggerated "咳" sound while washing dishes.[17] While "咳" in Chinese can denote a number of different sounds ranging from a cough to a sigh, the fact that the classmate acts as if he were lifting a millstone when merely picking up a kettle implies that the "咳" suggests a brief grunt of exertion in this case. Only a few standard equivalents from English apply, such as *ugh, oomph,* or the word *grunt* itself. *Oomph* may most specifically imply the act of lifting a heavy object, and also carries the kind of comical flavor that seems most suitable to this scene.

[17] Xiao, J. (2010: 260).

In a later scene from the same novella, the main character returns to visit the home of his master after a long period of absence. He brings a number of gifts for his master and the master's wife. The master's wife politely remarks:

来就来，还叮叮当当的带这样一大堆[18]

This particular statement is interesting in that the echoic element works metaphorically on two levels. On one level, the master's wife is describing the act of bringing gifts through the hyperbolic image of a load of presents so large that it rattles noisily, jostling from side to side as the gift-giver travels to his destination. On another level, "叮叮当当" stands in for the sound of hard objects colliding. One crucial aspect of this particular echoic term is its reduplication, which suggests both the repetitive nature and complexity of the sound that the term imitates. Though the English term "ding-dong" best approximates the sound of the Chinese term (*dingding-dangdang*), it usually implies sustained, echoing tones, usually produced by a bell; therefore, it is not an ideal fit. A word like "clink-clank" seems more appropriate because it indicates a rhythmic but short-lived clanging sound. Notably, "clink-clank" appropriately contains plosives, which generally stand in for high-impact sounds in languages that can support syllable-final consonants, while "ding-dong" has final position nasals, which tend to suggest gradual sound decay (Bladon 1977). In context, the echoic word could be used as follows:

> You should just visit, no need to come clink-clanking along with such a heaping load.

In a number of ways, this translation is rather loose. It does not maintain the echoic word's original part of speech, since the adverbial form is changed into a verb. However,

[18] Xiao, J. (2010: 276).

because the colloquial character of the message as a whole makes it rather challenging to transfer into English, the integrity of the original sentence structure must be sacrificed for the sake of clarity in translation.

A number of other onomatopoetic terms pose problems because they appear multiple times to describe various audible events. For example, the word "咚" appears once to describe the sound of a rock dropping into water,[19] once to describe the sound of a man's knees dropping onto the muddy ground,[20] and once to describe the sound of a plucked electric guitar string.[21] "咚" is conceptualized as representative of a broad range of sound events in Chinese, but there is no term in English covering an equivalent array of sounds. Therefore, "咚" must be translated differently according to context. A heavy rock dropping into water might be translated as *plop, kerplunk, splash,* or *plunk.* The first option, *plop,* has a broad and somewhat humorous usage in English that is not fitting for the serious scene in which the image (which, incidentally, is figurative in itself) occurs. The same is true of *kerplunk,* which also happens to create a fairly different aural impression because it is disyllabic. *Splash* implies a spray of water that is not alluded to in the original. Thus, *plunk* seems to be the most reasonable choice, especially since it shares some phonological similarities with "咚" (*dong*) through the use of a dark vowel. "咚" as knees dropping into mud is more complicated because it is not entirely clear if the sound is produced by the knees' contact with mud or by the sound of a heavy weight falling to the ground. This is further complicated by the fact that the dropping rock usage

[19] Lu, M. (2009: 80).

[20] Xiao, J. (2010: 258).

[21] Xiao, J. (2010: 280).

of “咚” figures it as a representative of water sounds, but more common usages figure it as a knocking or beating sound. Arguably, in this scene, the author is emphasizing, and even exaggerating, the force of the kneeling man’s extreme action and the intensity of feeling behind it. The proceeding sentence explains how the courtyard shakes from the impact. As such, an English word suggesting a dull collision between a heavy weight and the ground is more appropriate than a word describing a splash. *Thump* and *thud* are both reasonable choices. The use of “咚” as the sound of a guitar string may, however, require different treatment, and can be discussed in conjunction with another guitar noise, “砰”.[22]

“砰” also has multiple uses. It appears once as a sound of closing a metal latch on a box;[23] that “啪” was not used in this case shows that, like English, Chinese often has several echoic terms that can be applied to similar sound experiences. This “砰” might be translated as *click*, or more precisely, *plink* to imitate the specific sound of metal and the initial consonant in the original Chinese term. However, both “砰” and “咚” are difficult to translate as guitar string sounds because, surprisingly, English has no workable equivalents. Guitars are thought of as making the sounds *twang* or *strum* in English, but both of these words refer to the sound of a chord, in which several strings vibrate simultaneously. However, in the novella, it is clear that the onomatopoeia mimics the sounds of individual notes, as the fictional guitarists are tuning and warming up. One option here would be to borrow the pinyin of the Chinese terms in translation, which, indeed, works well with “咚” as *dong*; context makes the meaning of the echoic term

[22] Xiao, J. (2010: 280).

[23] Xiao, J. (2010: 263).

quite clear. The problem with rendering "砰" as *peng* is that the word contains a vowel that is unfamiliar to English speakers; a slightly modified invented sound like *ping* is easier for readers to imagine, especially since it might be cognitively connected to other related English onomatopoeia like *ring* and *pluck.*

Another case in which new onomatopoeia must be invented is in the case of the sound of the suona, described as 呜呜啦啦.[24] As the Chinese woodwind instrument known as the suona is not familiar to most English speakers, it is no surprise that no English onomatopoeia exists to describe its sound. Fortunately, a pinyin transliteration provides a fairly good sound description: *wuwu lala.*

There is one additional case in which pinyin may best express a sound in translation. At the climax of "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," the protagonist's master breaks his treasured suona in half out of frustration. The sound of cracking wood is expressed as "咔嚓".[25] In English, *snap* and *crack* would both be accurate translations. However, introducing the term in pinyin, as *ka-cha,* is compelling because its dissociative effect draws attention to the fact that this particular literary moment represents the peak in narrative action. It also mimics a strength and complexity of sound that the monosyllabic *crack* simply does not capture, or at least captures in a very different way. Because Chinese phonetics does not allow consonant clusters in initial positions and rarely features consonants within finals, acoustic complexity must be imitated through a disyllabic structure rather than through consonant blends. Other examples that illustrate

[24] Xiao, J. (2010: 265).

[25] Xiao, J. (2010: 288).

this linguistic phenomenon include 咕噜 *gulu* (grunting or snoring), 咯吱 *gezhi* (creaking), and 咕嘟 *gudu* (bubbling or gulping).

Like other forms of metaphorical language, onomatopoeia resists the imposition of clear rules for translation, as narrative context and ideological understandings of language both play enormous roles in determining how sound words are treated. This may come as a surprise to many readers and translators, as echoic words are rarely seen as more than quaint atmospheric devices or simple child's play.

Proper Names

Personal names are a special breed of metaphor. They are at once patently public and highly individual, universal and culturally bound. Names can be chosen by caregivers, peers, strangers, or the named individual herself, and as such, can carry implicit meanings that are aspirational, descriptive, or even performative. Like experientially grounded metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), names are essential to the human experience. They are encountered well before the named subject can engage in any complex linguistic exchange, as the infant learns to differentiate between the sounds associated with caregivers and self. Later on, once the child begins to engage with a larger community, her personal name serves as an historical anchor, a signifier for a pre-defined identity that she can choose to embrace, negotiate, or reject. This is because, with the tentative exception of the most willfully inventive appellations, given names tend to offer information about an individual's gender, group affiliations, family ideologies, and socio-economic background, while often also bringing to mind the stories of similarly named objects, places, character traits, or cultural figures. As such, it is clear

that the very practice of bestowing a proper name at birth is essentially an act of prescribing a metaphorical guideline for proper social behaviors and personal development. It is fundamentally the rendering of the individual as metaphor.

Naming practices vary significantly across cultures. In cultures influenced by Judeo-Christian traditions, proper names are usually selected from a large but ultimately limited stock of possibilities. Parents often perceive value in selecting a name with obvious mainstream precedents, and may choose to reference ancestral ties through shared intergenerational names. Here, both the state of having a given name and the ability to recognize and use standard names are forms of shared experience, allowing for the construction of community identity. While the sharing of given names and their historical contexts takes on paramount importance in this naming model, name etymology is usually relegated to a position of lesser significance. For example, while most English speakers can identify the names "John" and "David" as Biblical and can point to numerous people from the past and present who have been identified by those names, very few can confidently recount their lexical meanings. In the case of English, this may be the result of a linguistic rupture between the extant language and the ancient tongues that supplied many of its more popular names. Names derived from objects (e.g. Ruby, Rose), qualities (e.g. Chastity, Charity), or places, which are historically more commonly applied to females, are notable exceptions, but are still likely to follow certain patterns. Fashion related to sound quality and previous holders of names is the only easily ascertainable factor contributing to a situation in which "Amber" is a rather recognizable name, while "Quartz" is seen as highly unique.

Fashion also plays a role in the choice of Chinese proper names, but it tends to dictate themes rather than encourage exact copies. This is because Chinese proper names can be composed of any appropriate character or combination of characters. However, despite the long and coherent history of systematic writing in China, redundant use of well-known character combinations is not considered desirable in naming. The diversity of Chinese given names is quite striking because of this, though names do adhere to certain rules. Blum (1997) succinctly outlines the basics of Chinese naming practices; her most important points include that names are often chosen for their alleged auspiciousness (based on a variety of factors), are thought to govern the recipient's fate, and reflect generational belonging, intellectual background, and/or beliefs (364). While these naming criteria seem rather similar to those employed in other cultures, particularities abound. It is these particular cultural practices and connotations of names that resist easy translation, and therefore, will serve as the focus of the following analysis.

It is important to note that metaphorical naming extends far beyond proper names. In a general sense, naming also encompasses the use of (or refusal to use) titles, kinship terms, pronouns, nicknames, expletives, and others. This range of name types and its application are incredibly important in Chinese language and society, in that they are instrumental in establishing "the Chinese person as thoroughly imbedded in a world of speakers and hearers whose relationship to each other and the world are constituted through speaking certain terms, and where sound, object, and name are in some important senses combined" (Blum 1997: 358). Naming can even be extended beyond the realm of humans and other animate object to include place names and ideas. However, this

investigation will primarily target proper names, as these tend to be most specific and complicated to render in translation, as well as most frequently encountered in literature.

Generally, translators of Chinese need to develop guidelines for uniform treatment of names throughout a text. Ideally, these guidelines should respond to the text itself and the needs of its intended audience. For a variety of reasons, some translators will choose to write out all character names using pinyin or Wade-Giles Romanization. The benefit of this choice is that it helps to preserve the "authentic flavor" of the work, as readers are capable of at least approximating the sounds of the names as pronounced in Mandarin. However, this method has at least three major problems. Firstly, it cuts off the reader's access to names' lexical and allusive significance unless footnotes are provided. Secondly, foreign-looking words cause a number of difficulties for certain readers, especially when those words represent something as omnipresent and vital as a main character. Unfamiliarity slows reading speed, possibly frustrating literary enthusiasts with limited Chinese exposure. Pinyin spellings in particular also run the risk of causing orthographic confusion, as seen in the translation of "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," in which a surname spelled "You" in pinyin must be changed to "Yo" to prevent confusion with the English second person pronoun. Thirdly, Chinese Romanization rarely accounts for dialectical variation, and some translators may feel that offering a Mandarin name pronunciation is imperfect or disingenuous when characters are known to be speaking something other than Mandarin. This particular problem arises in the translation of "Paper Dreams," but will not be addressed in detail here. The complexities of this particular issue require their own focused explication project.

Like many of the fiction writers who author novels about China and the Chinese diaspora in English, other translators may decide to convert character names into English. Fortunately, this does not necessarily involve swapping characters' Chinese names for standard English names like "Jane" or "Betty", as adequate equivalents almost never exist. Usually, such translators will attempt to express a key meaning of the name through an English concept. Some may argue that this technique works best when dealing with "feminine" stock names related to flora, colors, and weather phenomena, as such names are recognized as similarly acceptable within English naming practices. Yet even in such cases, the translator is sacrificing the sound of the Chinese name, offering a reduced version of its meaning, and still failing to place the name within its rich cultural context. It is also worth considering the extent to which English conventions are capable of expressing the original dignity of the Chinese moniker, as infelicitously translated descriptive names run the risk of rendering the text's tone unintentionally trite or puerile.

A mixed approach also exists. In this case, the translator will give certain character names in Romanized Chinese form and others as approximate English meanings. There should be some identifiable logic behind the two different treatments of names within a single text. A prime example of this technique is seen in David Hawkes' (1973) well-known translation of Cao Xueqin's masterpiece, *The Story of the Stone.* Hawkes makes the decision to divide name translation techniques along the lines of characters' relative textual prominence, which, in most cases, correlates with their social classes and education levels. Thus, key characters like Bao-yu, Bao-chai, and Dai-yu received pinyin names in translation, while servants are given English names based on meanings of their Chinese nicknames, e.g. Aroma, Caltrop, and Snowpink. This proves

an intelligent decision when the novel in question includes the names of numerous superfluous characters; differentiation allows the reader to determine which characters are worth notice, and which are simply plot devices. In the case of a tale as famous as *The Story of the Stone*, it also seems advantageous to maintain the pronunciation of main characters' names to allow the reader to engage in dialogue with others who may be familiar with the story in its original Chinese form.

The two texts translated for this project do not contain an excessive number of character names. Moreover, many of the characters are identified by occupational titles, teknonyms, or other kinship terms, which usually lose relatively little information in translation in comparison with given names. For example, "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" features characters known as 母亲， 师傅， 师娘，大师兄， 老庄叔, which can be described in English as Mother, Master, Teacher Mom (the wife of a master who plays a maternal role vis-à-vis the master's students), Big Brother Classmate (the most senior student of a master as addressed by younger students), and Old Village Uncle respectively. The latter three titles do not have perfect English equivalents. They are examples of Chinese "classificatory" kinship terms, familial titles assigned to non-relatives for the purpose of establishing social hierarchy and developing close and meaningful relationships (Blum, 1997: 360). Nevertheless, this appears to be a situation in which readers should be trusted to intuitively comprehend the social significance of kinship terms in Chinese culture and infer the true relationships between characters through context. And in the cases of these explicitly descriptive character names, an approximate English term is far more informative than a pinyin representation of the name's sound. The most expedient translation choice seems clear.

However, the central characters of both translated texts are identified by their given names, all of which are imbued with key background information on the fictional individuals they name. The stakes are high in the translation of these complex, high-frequency names. Writing these names in pinyin in translation creates a clear division between important and secondary characters, but results in the loss of embedded information. On the other hand, selecting an English lexical approximation may yield inelegant aesthetic results while also possibly obscuring certain metaphorical implications of the names. Therefore, these names are good language samples on which to perform systematic metaphorical analyses for the purpose of choosing the best possible translation method.

Only three given names are offered in "Paper Dreams": 开音， 大元，and 小元. 开音 (or "Kaiyin" in pinyin), the name of the main protagonist, is of special importance, as the novel opens with the naming ceremony:

> 发现他不会说话， 父亲走了很远的路， 找到人家说的那个庙。寺庙住持，除了瘦得厉害， 并无什么异处，只要了她的奶名儿与八字，闭着眼睛坐了两个时辰， 方才吐出几个字：大名，叫开音吧.[26]

This short passage offers a wealth of information on Chinese naming, most of which should be fairly accessible to English readers through translation. It mentions the 奶名, a nickname given to children shortly after birth, in contrast with the 大名, a more formal name often given to older individuals. It implies that, for the characters in the story, the transition between childhood and adult names is prompted by the unfortunate discovery that the young girl receiving the name is mute. This speaks to the Chinese practice of changing names in response to misfortune, as some believe that choosing a more suitable

[26] Lu, M. (2009: 57).

name may improve the subject's fate (Blum 1997: 364). It also roughly outlines the roles of parents, communities, and spiritual intermediaries in the process of naming and re-naming. However, the importance of the name that is eventually chosen for the main character is embedded within the original language of the name itself, such that the translator must somehow tease out this meaning for the English reader.

The 开 character, in its traditional form (開), is an ideographic compound of a gateway and a pair of hands, suggesting the act of pushing open a door. While the character's most basic meaning is "to open," it has been extended to encompass other verbs such as "to start," "to bloom," and, under more limited circumstances, "to drive." From the perspective of cognitive systematicity, all of these meanings are metaphorically linked to the physical human experience of liminal space from which the subject can push out into the world, and which, in turn, may even be related to the common experience of birth. Thus, 开 implies not just that the subject's name itself carries a wish for the act of opening, starting, or blooming in the named individual, but also that naming itself is a linguistic act that solidifies identity and signifies the birth of the social being.

The name's second character, 音, specifies the object of the act of opening, starting, or blooming, 开. 音 is best translated as "sound," and is therefore a clear reflection on the protagonist's father's hope for a new beginning in which she may overcome her inability to speak. Even more appropriately, it is the second character in a compound word, 声音, meaning voice. Three of the four major English translations of 开 yield recognizable metaphorical connections in the target language when combined with 音. "Open(ing) sound/voice" suggests images of the opening of the mouth before speech,

or perhaps the initial lines of a musical piece. “Start(ing) sound/voice” implies the beginning of a new endeavor, perhaps punctuated by the sound of a gun on a racetrack or a car engine turning over. “Bloom(ing) sound/voice” evokes a synesthetic image in which music or other sound is imagined as visible, blossoming outward like a flower. Blooming also evokes the metaphorical connection between young girls and flowers, in which the development of the two are viewed as parallel. Aesthetically, this latter image is most appealing in isolation, and most suitable to the work as a whole. It is appropriate for the protagonist’s gentle yet complex character type, and complements the use of flower and tree conceits and images of travelling away from the “root” of one’s home that appear later in the novella.

Yet, a few problems remain with the use of “blooming voice” as a name in translation. The first is that readers of some dialects of English may be inopportunely reminded of “blooming” as a substitute for the expletive “bloody.” Fortunately, such a problem can be remedied by changing the progressive verb to a state: “voice in bloom.” The second major problem is that while “Voice in Bloom” is crucial to reader’s comprehension of the text, it is a terribly long and cumbersome name for a recurrent character. This is where Newmark’s practical suggestions for economical translation of metaphor are applicable, though as will become apparent, they are not always directly helpful in the case of names as metaphor. Because of the nature of naming, Newmark’s first three suggestions (replace the metaphorical image in the source language with a standard target language image, translate the metaphor using simile, and translate the metaphor as simile plus “sense”) are invalid; 开音 cannot be replaced with an English stock name for a number of reasons, and simile is simply not involved in personal

naming. Newmark's fourth suggestion, (convert the metaphor to "sense") describes a situation in which "Sound in Bloom" would always be used as the character's name, which, as aforementioned, produces a rather clumsy effect throughout the text. Obviously, the name can be neither changed or deleted, which means that it is necessary to resort to Newmark's last technique: reproducing the same metaphor combined with "sense." In other words, the best and only option is to provide readers with the pinyin spelling (Kaiyin) throughout the novella and an added gloss in the scene in which she is given her meaningful name. In other words, the final line of the first scene might appear as follows:

> [The abbot] then closed his eyes and sat for four hours before uttering a few words: for her adult name, call her Kaiyin, 'voice in bloom.'

And fortunately, "Kaiyin" in pinyin form does not contain any letter combinations or sounds that do not exist in English, meaning that English readers will be able to reasonably approximate the pronunciation of the name.

While rendering 开音 as "Kaiyin" sets a precedent for providing pinyin for key characters names in "Paper Dreams," it is still important to consider how this rule might affect the other proper character names, 大元 and 小元. In the text, 大元 and 小元 are brothers. 大 and 小, meaning "big" and "small" indicate "older" and "younger" respectively. 元, the shared character in the brothers' names, has several meanings in Chinese. When the names of the brothers are introduced in their father's interior monologue, the text reads:

> 自己两个儿子， 大的叫伊大元， 小的叫伊小元。 这名字，多好.[27]

[27] Lu, M. (2009: 58).

It is the last portion of this passage, which suggests that the brothers' names are somehow good or appropriate, that gives a clue as to how the 元 might be interpreted. The boys' father, 伊老师(Teacher Yi) is characterized as a well-intentioned but tiresome pedant. The text explicitly describes his undying enthusiasm for classical Chinese learning, and particularly the Confucian Doctrine of the Golden Mean. Such an individual is likely to name his sons with scholarly and moral concepts in mind. Therefore, the 元 in Teacher Yi's sons' name most likely refers to a "fundamental element," meaning that the "appropriateness" of the name is derived from its simplicity and sound philosophical derivation. The "appropriateness" may also refer to the structure of the 元 character, which can be decomposed into 二 and 儿, homophones which mean "two" and "son;" or, to the connection to 圆，a homophone of 元 indicating roundness and completion.

Thus, the translation quandary that arises out of these two names is similar to that encountered with the introduction of Kaiyin. For the reader, comprehension of both the context and the meaning of the names is contingent upon background in Chinese language or naming practices. English readers have no access to the written appearance of the name or its cultural meanings. Therefore, as before, a brief and unobtrusive intra-textual gloss offers a reasonable solution. Unobtrusiveness is of utmost importance because, while a gloss transmits the spirit and insinuations of the text, it is by no means faithful to the author's written word. Glosses that are shorter and more natural in appearance are less likely to disrupt the transmission of the writer's original logical flow. Thus, in this case, the translator cannot easily outline all of the implications of 元 that were mentioned above; she must select one or two important points to foreground, while

obscuring alternate possibilities. Given that the context in which the names are introduced features Teacher Yi and his pedagogy quite prominently, it may be best to show how his intellectual leanings affected his approach to naming without overtly explaining the complicated composition of the names. Thus, a translated version of the above passage could be:

> The older Yi boy was named Dayuan, and the younger was named Xiaoyuan. These two names were very appropriate, as they reflected Teacher Yi's classical principles.

Here, the English phrasing also separates the given names from the surname to sidestep the inevitable confusion that some readers may experience when encountering the Chinese naming format in which the family name precedes the personal name.

In "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," given names are somewhat more numerous; only a few of these names are important to the development of the story. As in "Paper in Enchantment," the main character's name is partially explained within the text when his father introduces him to his future master:

> 这是我儿子游天鸣， 打鸣的鸣， 不是明白的明.[28]

This mildly humorous line is reminiscent of exchanges that can be heard throughout the Chinese-speaking world, where the characters in a given name are explained in terms of their usual collocations. It also demonstrates that which Blum (1997) describes a hierarchy-based form of exchange between "three graded participants" (361) that is especially common in Chinese culture, wherein a so-called middle-man speaks on behalf of the subject to an exalted other. Specifically, the name 天鸣 and the context in which it appears has two important effects. First, it exposes the main character's humble family

[28] Xiao, J. (2010: 243).

background. 天鸣 is composed of a character meaning day, sky, or heavens, plus a character that, in this case, imitates the chirping sound of a bird or a cock's crow. A common countryside image of this sort, delineated by simple logograms, does not reflect a significant level of education and would not be considered especially sophisticated. In this way, the name allows for the formation of assumptions about the protagonist's family members and furthers the reader's understanding of the setting. Secondly, this piece of dialogue specifically helps to characterize the main character's father, who presumably had some part in the naming of his son. The fact that the father purposefully picked a modest character mimicking a bird's call rather than a homophone meaning "bright," "intelligent," or "comprehending" expresses the nature of his aspirations for his child. He does not presume that his son can become a brilliant scholar. Rather, he expects his child to participate in the rural community through the production of song. These expectations are confirmed throughout the novella. Even if the implications of this passage are not as apparent in English as in Chinese, they arguably explain the main character's name clearly enough to allow for the use of its pinyin form throughout the remainder of novella. Furthermore, no other personal character names carry meanings important enough to require explanation, and thus, should also be expressed through pinyin. In the case of the main character's name, readers can experience both the sound and general meaning of the original. The passage in question might be translated as follows:

> This is my son, Yo Tianming… the 'ming' character in his name is the one that means 'a rooster's crow,' *not* the one in the word 'to comprehend.'

The English version becomes significantly wordier than its original Chinese counterpart, but this outcome may actually help transmit the text's message to the reader. The

strategic use of punctuation indicating timing and emphasis, plain diction, and uneconomical sentence structure contributes to the sense that the speaker is both nervous and unrefined. This is also one place in which standard pinyin is altered on the 游 surname to prevent confusion with the English pronoun.

There is one instance in which a nickname involving wordplay presents a challenge to the translator of this novella. Tianming's music teacher is generally referred to as "Master" or "Master Jiao" (焦 is his surname), but there is one point at which Tianming becomes so frustrated with him that he secretly calls him 焦黑炭. This name makes sense in translation as "Charcoal Jiao" because of frequent references to the dark, sun-worn condition of the character's skin. Through universal metaphor, this darkness is also implicitly connected to the character's stern, somber, and altogether unwelcoming nature. However, the English translation loses a pun on the character 焦; it is a surname, but also means "dry" or "burnt." However, in this case, the pun might be judged as superfluous, or at least less valuable than the maintenance of textual consistency. Consequently, it might not be necessary to bring it to the reader's attention through glosses, footnotes, or other conspicuous devices.

Names and other personal forms of address inhabit an irregular category of metaphor that operates through lexical level comparisons as well as the performances of naming, re-naming, and contextualizing. Names are problematic as representations of individuals even when they are employed in their native language milieu, though it is the very fact that they are fluid and capable of being transgressed that makes them so powerful. This being the case, translators must make efforts to elucidate the special

features of names, but at the same time, recognize that the essential limitations of naming may make "exact" translation impossible.

Conclusion

Finally, in assessing the relative success of her efforts to translate metaphor, the translator must first turn to self-reflection. In doing so, she will most certainly discover that her work is, above all, fertile grounds for metaphor in itself.

Hanne (2006) suggests that, due to their common non-exhaustive, partial nature, and the way in which they force choices upon their producers, translations and metaphors are deeply related processes. Besides the fact that translation and metaphor shared a common Latin term ("*translatio*") during the European Middle Ages (210), this becomes apparent through translation theorists' broad and ample use of metaphor in describing the nature of their work. Hanne highlights some vivid examples: Sabine Fenton asserts that translation is "a can of worms" and a "minefield;" Margaret Sayers Peden compares translation to the project of dismantling an old house, moving it to a different location, and plastering it back together, while Walter Benjamin employs a similar re-gluing metaphor and Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes conjure images of refashioning recycled, second-hand scraps; Percy Bysshe Shelley acknowledges the organic nature of translation through a comparison to a blooming flower while Tulsi Das explains it in terms of the growth of a banyan tree; Susan Bassnett uses a body metaphor in which translation is a blood transfusion; Paola Galiberti summons the common Italian *traduttore, traditore* aphorism in describing translation as the work of a "double agent"; Edward Fitzgerald expresses translation as imperial plundering; Gayatry Spivak speaks of "love and surrender" to a source text. To Hanne's impressive collection, one could add

some classic examples, such as John Dryden's colorful image of a translator as a shackled, tight-rope-walking man (Biguenet & Schulte 1992: 18), and Edmund Keeley's suggestion that "translation is a movable feast that must initially serve the taste of its particular day and then be prepared to change in keeping with the taste of another day" (63). Though all of these comparisons express an underlying notion of the difficulty of translation, they also demonstrate the way in which the choice and construction of metaphor can highlight completely dissimilar dimensions of the same activity.

The goal of handling metaphor by bringing together a number of these translation dimensions, including cognitive, aesthetic, and practical concerns, is quite a lofty one. Whether or not this goal has been achieved in full, it is the humble hope of the author that this brief investigation has at least encouraged translators to see their labor in a different light. It has sought to show how different voices from various fields can and should be taken into consideration in the process of transforming the language arts of one tongue into an imitative product in another. Though no truly foolproof "method" of translation has arisen out of this project, the fact that each metaphor examined required individualized treatment and customized solutions is informative in itself. Metaphor has proven to be so deeply imbedded in patterns of human thought that it cannot and should not be neatly constrained by a set of rules. Thus, if a description must be applied to the "method" advocated here, it might be best termed as controlled eclecticism. The more information a translator can cull and meld together to help her express a metaphor in translation, and the more she treats each metaphor as an exceptional yet logically-grounded expression of a specific attitude, the more communicative success she is likely to attain.

Consequently, though attitudes towards the overall act of translation are clearly quite personal and can vary significantly, translation is ultimately an activity that benefits immensely from collaboration. The translations that came out of this project were certainly improved through discussions and numerous rounds of editing with individuals who offered multiple perspectives. Some of these collaborators are native speakers of Chinese who speak English as a second language, some are native English speakers with knowledge of Chinese, and others are English-speaking only. The former two groups were instrumental in addressing challenges that arose in interpreting and transferring the original text, while the English only group offered invaluable feedback regarding the readability of the translated product. Indeed, translation should be viewed as a cooperative act because, whether or not the translator seeks advice ahead of the publication of her work, the translated work cannot express itself if the translator fails to earn the reader's trust. In most contemporary contexts, this trust is not simply established through extensive footnotes explaining every allusion in the original text. After all, with the increase in access to training in Chinese language skills and principles of multiculturalism, scholarly translated texts have lost their authority in China studies beyond the realm of translation theory itself, and rightfully so. In general, literary translations now exist for the purpose of introductory-level pedagogy and the enjoyment of a general readership. But this does not necessarily mean that readers' trust can be gained through offering an entertaining story that obviously only roughly approximates aspects of the original. Translators need not focus on contemporary translation's marginalization from scholarship or interpret its change in target audience as a call to "dumb down" earlier translations. Rather, they should grasp the opportunity to mine the

expressive features of the source text and embrace the challenge of balancing readability and cultural specificity for a popular audience. And in order to achieve a sense of trust between the reader, original writer, and herself, the translator must seek a middle ground and seriously considers how to blend the metaphorical cognitive processes revealed in two different languages.

CHAPTER II

TRANSLATIONS

One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix

By Xiao Jianghong

1

Once we had crossed the river, Father warned me again: “No matter what the Master asks of you, you go along with him, okay?” I nodded. Father crouched down and straightened my shirt. My mother had made that short, button-down shirt for me just two months ago in hopes that such a garment would make me look a bit more mature. She had even carefully selected the dark blue color for that purpose. Only the morning before I left home did Mother finally allow me to change into those new clothes. I could hear dissatisfied grumbling from behind my shirt. Father wrinkled his brow and noted that the new clothes still hadn’t covered up my mild stench. It was clear that the short dark blue shirt could not prolong the arrival of the day that would change my world forever. After all, I was already eleven years old, and age was not like clothing; it would not shrink or stretch in the wash.

At the break of dawn, my Mother rolled me out of my bed. I see that her face was full of annoyance. She detested my habit of sleeping in. But when it was time for me to head out the door, her eyes were then overflowing with a mixture of hope, bereavement, and helplessness. Father, on the other hand, was extremely resolute. His dream was for me to become a suona horn master. Our hometown, Water Village, had no suona master, so whenever a wedding or a funeral would come around, folks always had to invite musicians from another village. Doing so was no easy task, and if it happened that the musicians they found already had an appointment, then the wedding or funeral in Water Village would be poorly attended. Without the energetic sound of the suona, the host would lose face entirely, and guests would feel that something was missing. Therefore, when a suona master was invited to Water Village, he would always receive special

treatment. When it came to cigarettes, wine, and tea, he would never be denied; he would even enjoy special dishes prepared on his behalf. And on the day of his departure, the suona master's host would accompany him on a journey of at least half a mile, and at parting, would give him some money. Though the pay was not substantial, it represented the goodwill of the host. At this point, it would be impossible to avoid the musician's ritualized refusal of the cash, but in the end, the suona player would always accept. Everyone understood this rule. Giving money was the norm, receiving money was the norm, and even pretending to refuse money was part of the ceremony.

According to my mother, my father's wish that I become a suona master had nothing to do with the pay. When Father was young, he also wanted to play the suona. However, even though he paid visits to a number of teachers, none of them would take him in. He implored all of the suona masters within a twenty-five mile radius to tutor him, yet he still did not get to play even a day's worth of music. All of the teachers said that Father was too crafty, was not suona-playing material. Many years had passed, and Mother had originally believed that Father's aspirations had long ago gone the way of the leaves that fall in deep autumn, mold, and turn to mud. But this was not at all the case. From the time when I was old enough to understand the workings of things, I noticed that Father had started to look at me strangely, like a hungry consumptive squatting before a pot of dog meat soup, kneading his fist and rubbing his palms together, itching to have a go at it.

One time, when my schoolteacher crossed paths with Father and me on Water Village's wooden bridge, he excitedly reported that all of the way from first to fifth grade, my academic test scores had never exceeded 30%. At the time, I hung my head in

shame, prepared to accept the storm of anger that was certain to rain down on me. When my schoolteacher had finished speaking, Father nodded, then magnanimously waved his hand and said that 30% is already not bad. Afterwards, he led me away. When we got to the bottom of the bridge, he looked back at the silhouette of the poor, muddle-headed teacher, emitting two dry guffaws: *hei hei.* Little did Mr. Teacher know that Yo Bencheng of Water Village had bigger plans for his son.

I really didn't like to study, and most of the kids in Water Village were similarly unscholarly. We all started out alright, but slowly lost interest. The major issue was that we couldn't understand the lectures. There was also a time when our math teacher proved himself to be completely inaccurate. One day he gave us an answer to a problem, and the next morning, he stood in the classroom and quietly made an announcement, saying, "Students, yesterday when I returned home, I sat by my stove and thought for a while. I started to feel that there was something fishy about the answer to that problem, something incorrect. I was so upset that I didn't sleep well all night, and today will make special efforts to correct the mistake for you." We just laughed for a little while. We later heard that the math teacher had actually only completed primary school, or even more seriously, hadn't even graduated from primary school. We had no alternative but to express our contempt. We did so by skipping class, running wild all over the place.

I didn't like to study, but I also didn't like the idea of being a suona master. I can't say for sure why I didn't like the thought of playing the suona. Perhaps it was because I had listened to my father indoctrinate me with the many virtues of being a suona master from the time I was very young. I had heard this so much that I was fed up

with it, loathed it. Also, I had determined that my father hoped I would play the suona because he was scheming to cash in on wedding and funeral performances.

2

If you go over Dayin Mountain, you can see Earth Village. That was the home of my soon-to-be master. Our region had five villages, separately called Metal Village, Wood Village, Fire Village, Earth Village, and my Water Village. Altogether, they formed a town. According to logic, this town should be called the Town of Five Phases, but it was actually called the Town of Second-to-None.

My future master's house was in the middle of a flourishing bamboo forest. The earth and ridgepole walls of his house were set against a backdrop of crisp green. I had once leafed through an illustrated copy of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that I had found in my grandfather's old trunk. It contained a picture called "Making Three Calls at the Thatched Cottage"; the scene before my eyes was quite similar to that image. On the straight, level path to the dirt wall house, Father was huffing and puffing, his forehead covered in beads of sweat the size of pinheads, his two fists tightly clasped. When I glanced at him, he became somewhat embarrassed, certain that I had perceived his nervousness. So, he mocked himself in an especially self-deprecating tone.

Unable to preserve his dignity, Father changed the topic. "The home of celestial beings!" he said. "Look: green dragons on the left, white tigers on the right, pearl sparrows behind, and a guardian snake ahead. At first glimpse I can tell that this isn't the home of any ordinary person." I wanted to laugh, but didn't dare. Father didn't know anything about fengshui. He even mixed things up when reciting such a common saying. I had heard Water Village's fengshui expert use this phrase before, but he had said that

the pearl sparrow was ahead, and the guardian snake was behind. I thought that Father was really too anxious, afraid that the tragedy of his youth would be played out again in the next generation. I suddenly felt a vengeful sense of delight, thinking that it would be good if the master disliked me, even better if he was out, better still if he had traveled far away, and best if he would not return for half a year.

Noticing that I was taking lazy steps, wandering from side to side, Father anxiously roared from behind me, "God damn you, show some proper form, okay? It would be terrible if the master saw you like that."

Father's luck was better than expected. Earth Village's most celebrated suona master was at home that day.

The skin on my future master's face was very dark, and he wore a black robe. Because of this, he looked like a piece of top quality charcoal. When he strolled out of his house, he was in the process of lighting a long-stemmed pipe. The burning tobacco crackled fiercely. I was nervous, a bit afraid that that spark would spontaneously ignite. He seemed to have noticed my nervousness; he raised one of his legs and crossed it over his opposite kneecap, pointed the bottom of his shoe into the air, and used the sole to extinguish the remaining half bowl of tobacco. From the fact that he had completed such a difficult maneuver just to put out a lit pipe, I could see that my future master was a very complicated person.

"Master Jiao, I'm Yo Bencheng. This is my son, Yo Tianming… the 'ming' character in his name is the one that means 'a rooster's crow,' *not* the one in the word 'to comprehend,'" Father bent at the waist, stepping gingerly towards the black-faced man under the eaves of the house. While trotting forward, he stuck a jittery hand into his

pocket to rummage around for his cigarettes, his eyes still reverently fixed on that blackened face. Poor Father, he had wanted to do too many things in the distance of just six or seven steps and he lacked composure. Thus, his left foot got tangled up in his right foot, and he fell face-first straight into the ground, chomping on a mouthful of dirt as his box of cigarettes flew from his hands and landed in a puddle to the side of the courtyard. My heart skipped a beat, and I hurried to help father up. When I tried to lift him, he threw off my hand and said, "What do you think you're doing? Go kowtow to the master!" I didn't listen to him. After all, I had known my father much longer than I had known this master, and my emotions and conscience both told me that I should be attending to this man from Water Village who had just crawled up from the ground. Once I had made my decision, I resolutely grasped Father's wrist. When I raised my head, I noticed that he had a fresh gash on his forehead, from which beads of dark red blood were racing out. I instantly became upset, and tears rolled down my face.

The master waved his hand and said, "Kowtow? What kowtow? Why do you need to kowtow to me? No one can kowtow to me."

Father fell silent. He sheepishly fished his cigarettes out of the puddle and took one out of the box. It was bloated, still soggy and dripping as if shedding tears.

"Would you like this?" Father extended the hand holding the cigarette, completely humiliated.

The man under the eaves raised the pipe in his hand and said, "I'll smoke this." My father, my future master, and I were all frozen stiff. Nobody spoke, mostly because we didn't know what to say. But the lump of charcoal under the eaves was not actually perturbed. After all, this was his territory, and his face had reflected his relaxed state all

along. He took a look at the sky, so I followed his gaze. He certainly must have thought that the weather was pleasant that day, and I also thought that this was so. The sun was like a fresh fried egg, dazzlingly bright. My future master used his hand to shade his eyes. He looked at the sun for a while, then slowly filled his pipe again. After lighting his pipe, he finally spoke.

"Which village are you from?" When he asked this question, he looked at neither one of us, but Father was overjoyed to receive even this arrogant treatment. Father took two steps forward and said "We're from Water Village. Yo Shuhua suggested that we come here." He treated the name "Yo Shuhua" with exaggerated emphasis. Yo Shuhua was my cousin and our village chief.

I heard a light snort come from the suona master's nose, as if a caterpillar had been crawling up his nostril. He once again lowered his head to take a puff of his pipe, acting as if he had not heard Father's reply. Seeing that You Shuhua's name had failed to produce as strong an impression as he had expected, Father fell into despair.

"How old are you?" the suona master asked.

My lips moved and I was just about to open my mouth when my father's voice whistled past me like an arrow: "thirteen." This was two years older than the age I had been planning to supply. Afraid that the suona master would not believe him, Father added the explanation: "on the eleventh of this month, he'll be fully thirteen."

"As you should know, thirteen and above, that's the rule," the suona master said.

"I know, I know," Father replied.

"This kid doesn't look like he's thirteen." There was a stern look in the suona master's eyes.

"This son-of-a-bitch has a baby face. He's looked like this ever since he was ten, and I've never seen him mature."

"Enh!" the suona master nodded his head. It appeared that he had come to some sort of a decision. Father's eyebrows suddenly shot up. He ran under the eaves of the house and asked, trembling: "You'll accept?"

"Humph! It's still too early to say."

I had originally believed that becoming a suona master was quite easy. Get apprenticed to a master, learn two melodies, that's about it. But based on the situation I saw unfolding before me that day, I realized that there would be many trials to come. There was a table sitting in the courtyard. Atop the table was a ladle filled with water. The ladle was made from a giant halved gourd. The suona master passed me an inch-long reed, which I received with confusion, not knowing what he intended.

"Use the reed to suck the gourd dry in one breath. You're not allowed to take a breath in the middle," my future master addressed me firmly.

I looked at Father, and Father resolutely nodded back at me, clenching his teeth. His encouragement appeared especially desperate.

I stuck the reed into the water and once again peered at the two onlookers. The suona master's mood was in complete contrast with my father's; he was peaceful and natural, just like the water in the gourd before me.

I released the air in my lungs, dropped my head to place the reed firmly in my mouth, then squeezed my eyes shut and sucked in my cheeks. In an instant, an overwhelming, cool stream rushed into my throat. I opened my eyes to see that the water in the gourd was draining rapidly. At first, I was still full of confidence. But once I had

drained half of the water, I was already feeling a bit out of breath. And when there was only a third left, I barely had any air remaining. I even started to feel dizzy and my chest grew stuffy, as if I were about to die.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, there's not much left." It was my father's voice, seemingly drifting from far away.

In the end, I found myself with my bottom on the ground, lifting my head to gulp down big mouthfuls of air. I looked at the sun again; it had become a burnt egg.

When the sun had turned yellow again, I heard my father pleading with the suona master.

"Please just take him!" Father said, sobbing.

"His lungs aren't good enough; he's not suona-playing material."

"His lungs are more than good enough, really. Often, when he howls at his little sisters, all of Water Village can hear him."

The suona master chuckled and said nothing.

At this point I saw Father come over, holding in his tears. He gnashed his teeth as he grabbed the ladle on the table. He came right at me, swinging wildly.

You little bastard, if you can't even suck water out of a ladle, what exactly *can* you do? He pounded the ladle into my head, and I heard the sound of bones cracking. I yelped sharply, and suddenly, up became down, and the sun disappeared. There was only some splattered yolk, spinning and flowing out in all directions.

"How about that? Was his shout loud enough? His lungs strong enough?" Father's voice was strange, gloomy and thick.

I struggled to open my eyes, and once again saw Father raising the ladle high above me.

"Shout! Shout loudly!" Father hollered.

I didn't know why Father was acting like this. How could my inability to become a suona master make him so exasperated?

In my complete shock, I saw a hand.

That hand firmly grasped Father's wrist.

3

Many years later, Master asked me if I knew why he had accepted me as an apprentice at the beginning. I said that it was because he was good-hearted and had feared my father might beat me into the afterlife. Master shook his head, said, "You're wrong. I took you in as my apprentice because of your tears."

I asked him, "What tears?"

Master said, "The tears you shed after your Father fell and you helped him up." Father left, and as I watched his back disappear into the distance, I suddenly felt a sense of vulnerability. In the past, when I had seen him every day, I never thought he was of much importance. When he would spank me, in my mind, I'd curse him: "Yo Bencheng, you bastard." But at that point, I realized exactly how important my father was. He was like a tree, blocking the wind and the rain. When the day arrived that I had to leave that big tree, I suddenly discovered that the rain falling on my body was icy and wet, and the sun shining on my face was hot enough to roast a young boy like me.

From this time on, I became my own person. Watching Father's silhouette slowly grow fainter and smaller, I could not help but cry for a little while. Master stood next to

me, reaching out a hand to rest on my shoulder, patting me softly. A heat surged through my heart and I cried even harder.

At dinner, Master introduced me to his wife, who I was instructed to call "Teacher Mom." She was very skinny, and also very dark. When she walked, she wobbled from side to side, like a well-cooked buckwheat noodle. She also talked a lot. At the dinner table, she asked me about many things, all having to do with Water Village. She said that she had a relative who also lived there. When compared to his wife, Master spoke significantly less. In the course of an entire meal, he may have uttered two phrases. When I picked up my bowl, he said: "Eat." When I put down my bowl, he said: "You've had enough."

After eating, I rushed to scrub the dishes. In the process of washing, I would sneak peeks at Master and his wife as they sat in the main room. Teacher Mom directed instructions towards me, constantly nodding her head, a nearly imperceptible smile on her face. Master, on the other hand, did not move. He simply concentrated on smoking his pipe. The fog of smoke he exhaled was thick, reminding me of those days when I cooked lime with Father in Water Village. I knew that Teacher Mom's smile had something to do with my washing, just as my washing had something to do with Mother's grumbling by lamplight the night before I left home. Mother had said: "Living away from home is not nearly as easy as living here. You'll need to be quick, sharpen your eyes, and keep that lazy tail of yours tucked between your legs."

When I had finished washing the dishes, Teacher Mom told me that her three sons had all started families and moved away. Now that there were only two old people in the home, they would need me help out in any way I could.

At night, I lay in my bed, thinking about how I would start playing the suona the next day. I was somewhat excited, and also a bit afraid. Overall, I thought that my life should not be so complicated. I still hadn't played enough. I was still a kid, and kids should play. I thought of my companions, who were surely catching fireflies by the wooden bridge in Water Village at that very moment. They would put the captured fireflies in a clear jar to use as a lantern when traipsing about at night.

Morning arrived, and I was still chasing fireflies in my dreams when I heard two sharp coughs. The coughs were produced by Master. I was startled, realized that this was my call to get up. After all, Master was not my dear old dad, who would just charge in, tear off the bed cover to expose my rear, and paddle my buttocks. I thought that because Master was treating me as a guest, his methods were a bit less direct. Once I had gotten dressed and headed outside, I first called to Teacher Mom, who was under the eaves shelling fava beans. She nodded to me. I yawned, realizing that the blood-red morning sun was still struggling to pass the mountaintops. A feeling of resentment rose from my gut. I thought, the sun hasn't even come out yet, and I still need to get up! Even though Father would smack my rump at home, at least that was not until the sun had already been high in the sky for a while. Seeing the ugly signs of sleep still on my face and my mouth, Teacher Mom said, "Your master has gone to the bend in the river. You should go too!"

When I headed in the direction Teacher Mom had pointed, I saw Earth Village's river bend. Even though the place was called Earth Village, the river bend there was bigger than the one in Water Village. In all directions, the riverbanks were covered in smoky willows. Water Village had those trees as well; from far away, they look like

billowing smoke. The smoky willows hugged the crisp, green river on all sides, and a few pure white cranes leisurely soared above the water. Master was standing on the rocky beach, silently watching the surface of the water. His silhouette appeared lonely and small.

Master plucked a reed from a cluster growing by the river side and pulled off the tufts on the end. He passed the three-inch reed to me, and said, “Go suck up river water. Remember, the reed should be just barely submerged.” At the beginning, I thought that this must be an easy task, but once I had tried it, I realized that it was not so simple. My face became red, my legs went soft, and my little stomach knotted up, but I still failed to suck up a single drop of water. I turned my head around to look at Master. His countenance was gloomy. He said, “As soon as you suck up the water, you can return to the house.”

The sky was completely dark when I returned to Master’s house. Master and his wife were gathered around an oil lamp flame the size of a pea. When she saw me come in, Teacher Mom held out a bowl of food for me. The food had not even entered my hand when Master spoke.

“Did you suck up the water?”

I shook my head.

“So you’ve come back here to rub your balls and feel sorry for yourself, huh?” Master stood up aggressively, angrily throwing his tobacco pipe to the ground. His face, which was originally as black as a crow’s, became even blacker in this instant.

And at that moment, I realized that that black-faced man meant business.

Master scraped half of the dinner out of my bowl. Teacher Mom tried to intercede on my behalf, saying that my father had already paid my living expenses, that I was still a kid and needed to eat to grow.

"Kid? Which of Laozi's disciples was not a kid when he arrived? And when Laozi sought the tutelage of a master, he had not eaten for three days!"

That night in bed, I bawled to my heart's content. When I had finished crying, I thought of Father's cruelty. When I had finished thinking of Father's cruelty, I thought of Mother's kindness. In the midst of thinking, I fell asleep. After what seemed like just a moment of rest, I heard that coughing sound again. I crawled out of bed and groped my way to the window, where I discovered that the blood-red light of the rising sun had not even appeared behind the mountains.

Every day for the next ten days, I grasped that reed and tried to suck river water. Earth Village residents who passed by stood far away and yelled, "Old Jiao the Third has taken in another pupil." Some of them shouted, "This kid just might become Old Jiao the Third's disciple; it seems that he's got some skill." I heard some envy in their voices; surely their own children lacked ability and had been rejected by Master. In this way, I built up a bit of confidence and continued to put decent effort into the most boring task in the world.

At dawn one day, the cranes on the river were especially numerous. They followed the river bend, floating in the depths, dazzling the eye with tail upon tail of snowy white. Just as I had done hundreds of thousands of times, I bent my waist, planted my foot, released my breath, and suddenly ended up with a mouthful of icy cold. I swished the water around in my mouth, then lightly spat it out into my palm. Not bad, I'd

sucked up the water. Looking at the clear puddle in my hand, I suddenly drifted away for a moment, something unspeakable and unknowable tumbling around in the center of my heart. My throat slowly hardened. I made a crazed dash toward Master's dirt wall house. I ran into the courtyard to find Master weaving a reed mat.

"I sucked it up." I emphasized each word with a stamp of my foot.

I had originally believed that Master would smile, nod his head, and say that I could now play the suona. But this wasn't the case. When Master finished listening to me, he picked up an even longer reed from the pile next to his foot, pulled off the top and the bottom, and handed it to me. I put the reed upright and found that it was even taller than I was. I looked at Master in disbelief, but he just dropped his head and continued to weave his mat with utmost seriousness. After half a moment, he raised his head again, and said, "Go! Keep sucking."

4

I had been in Earth Village for two months and four days when Lan Yu came. The night before Lan Yu came, a rare thunderstorm occurred. When I arose the next day, I saw that there was a boy kneeling in the courtyard. His body was drenched from top to bottom, his shirt and pants full of yellow mud. Standing next to him was a thirty-something guy, who was also soaked all over. The guy kept rubbing his hands together, his eyes following Master. At that moment, Master was going back and forth to the cattle pen, tossing large armfuls of hay to the cows. He ignored Lan Yu and his father as they stood in the middle of the courtyard, as if the two people were merely a mirage. I could discern Lan Yu's father's humiliation, and I thought of the events that took place on the day of my arrival. I felt some pity for the two visitors.

At that time, Lan Yu raised his head to look in my direction. I gave him a faint yet amicable smile. Lan Yu's dirt-smeared face also spread into a thin, light smile, like the ripples that appear when one throws a thumb-sized rock into a lake. Many years later, Lan Yu would tell me that, while kneeling in the muddy water at that time, he had felt that the earth and sky might crumble. He had first made the decision to return home regardless of his father's disapproval, but when he saw my smile, he decided to stay. Master did not decide to accept Lan Yu until his father had also repeatedly dropped his kneecaps into the mud. At the time, Master was in the process of tossing a bale of hay next to the cattle pen. To this very day, I can still hear that strange sound in my ears. I saw Lan Yu's father's legs bend, splashing down into the mud before him with a *thud!* The whole courtyard shook. Master turned his head and froze. Then he said, "I suppose I can test to see if he is suona-playing material, but if he's no good, you have to lead that kid back home."

Unlike mine, Lan Yu's examination consisted of numerous parts. Besides sucking up water, he also had to blow on feathers. Master threw a chicken feather into the air, and Lan Yu had to use his mouth to keep it floating there, exerting quite a bit of effort to keep it from dropping to the ground. And there was also target practice: he had to hold a mouthful of water, face a wooden card on the table, and shoot the card down from four steps away. I was worried for Lan Yu because I had not even been able to suck the water from a ladle.

But Lan Yu completed the examination with ease. Not only was I shocked, but Master was also a bit surprised. Even though he made efforts to suppress his surprise, when Lan Yu shot down the card on the table, his eyebrows instantly drew together to

form deep furrows. Even now, I readily admit that my junior classmate Lan Yu was much more talented than I was.

So Lan Yu stayed with us and shared my bed. Master introduced us with utmost seriousness, saying to Lan Yu, “This is your senior classmate. Brothers in study must behave just like blood brothers. Do you understand?” Lan Yu nodded his head. I nodded as well.

When we were in bed that night, Lan Yu asked me, “Is playing the suona fun?” I told him that I didn’t know. He turned over in surprise and retorted, “How could you not know? Haven’t you been here for two months?”

I said, “I still haven’t played a day’s worth of suona!”

“So what exactly have you been doing?” he asked.

Drinking water. Drinking water from the river bend” I responded.

After Lan Yu arrived, the single kid sucking up water at the river bend in Earth Village turned into two kids. The Earth Village residents who passed us would loudly shout, “Old Jiao the Third has taken in another apprentice; the Jiao Family Troupe will be strong.”

During those days spent sucking up water, Master and his suona troupe went out to play a total of ten times. They traveled all over Second-to-None. Lan Yu and I also got a chance to meet the members of the Jiao Family Troupe. The most senior member was about the same age as my father; Master had Lan Yu and I call him Big Brother Classmate. We both felt a bit awkward about this. After all, he was a full-bearded adult. We quietly greeted him, and Big Brother Classmate rubbed our heads. Master smiled and said, “If you rub too hard, everything will fall out.” Big Brother Classmate laughed for a

while, with his mouth opened wide and his beard jumping all over his face. When he stuck the suona in his mouth, the reed and the brass fitting would disappear from sight. As a rule, on the night before leaving to perform, the Jiao Family Troupe would practice for a little while. They would set a table out in the courtyard, on which they placed mushroom cap tea and fried soybeans prepared by Teacher Mom. Master and his apprentices would spread out around the table, first discussing some day-to-day things. During this time, one person's voice was the loudest and most thunderous. That person was Second Brother Classmate. According to Teacher Mom, Master was most satisfied with this apprentice. His skills were good and he was hard-working. He was especially talented at playing funeral tunes. His performances could make everyone in the mourning hall shed tears. After chatting for a little while, Master coughed twice. Knowingly, each man pulled his suona out of its cloth back. First, they tuned the horns to make sure the pitch was correct. Then, Master would propose a song. If they were going out to play at a wedding, they would play a happy tune with a fast rhythm, which would lightly float and bounce around the courtyard. If they were going to play for a funeral, they would play a slow, sad tune, like sticky rice soup spreading out on the floor. When Master played a solo, Lan Yu and I both felt tears welling up in our eyes.

People in the Town of Second-to-None usually hired a four-piece; this so-called "four-piece" was a suona troupe with only four musicians playing together. The more discerning choice was an "eight-piece," which, besides including four suona players, also had a drummer, an ocarina player, a gong player, and a cymbal player. Not only was an eight-piece bigger, it also played with extraordinary vigor. Teacher Mom told me that whenever an eight-piece would practice, all of the people of Earth Village would show up

in the courtyard. They would listen in awed silence up until the end, at which point they would finally disperse. After all, playing in an eight-piece was difficult, and therefore, hiring one was expensive. Ordinary folks could never hope to invite one for an event. Residents of Earth Village happened to be favorably situated such that, in a lucky year, they could hear the eight-piece practice once or twice. I proceeded to ask Teacher Mom, "Is there anything greater than an eight-piece?" She laughed and said that there was. I asked, "What is it?"

"One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," she replied.

"How is it played?" I asked.

"Solo!" Teacher Mom said, her expression showing solemn respect.

"Solo? Who plays solo?" Lan Yu and I asked in surprise.

The night breeze tousled Teacher Mom's hair. Her countenance reminded me of a history book. After a long time, she spoke: "Your master, of course."

5

At three months, I used a reed bigger than a man to suck up river water. Yet I had still not played the suona. Master would only allow me to go down to the fields to help his wife pull grass from between the corn stalks. It seemed that June weather in Earth Village was much hotter than it was in Water Village. In Water Village, this time of the year was usually wet and rainy. While in the corn fields, I told Teacher Mom that Earth Village was not as good as Water Village because Water Village isn't as hot. She laughed with a hearty *haha*, then said, "This kid from the Yo Family misses home."

In the afternoon, we finished work and packed up to head back to the house. When we passed by the bend in the river, my junior classmate Lan Yu was squatting

there, sucking up water. Lan Yu had natural abilities. He had only been with us for a month when Master gave him the reed that was taller than a man. It had taken me a whole month more than Lan Yu to get to that point.

After eating, Lan Yu went to wash dishes. Since he had arrived, dish-washing had become his job. At the beginning, I was pleased with this arrangement, thinking that I could finally avoid this unpleasant task. But not even two days had passed when Master ordered, "Go down to the fields." After spending only half a day in the fields, I had already started to miss washing dishes.

The sound of Lan Yu washing dishes was particularly noisy. I knew that when washing dishes, it was difficult to avoid making some crashing and banging noises, but never thought that it could be quite so noisy. Even when simply picking up a kettle, Lan Yu was certain to make enough clatter to startle the heavens and move the earth. He would bend his waist and emit a loud *oomph* sound, as if the thing he was picking up was not a kettle but a millstone. Lan Yu quickly emerged from the kitchen, flinging his two sopping wet hands, his eyes fixed on Master and Teacher Mom as if to tell them that the he had finished his assignment.

Lan Yu received praise from Teacher Mom, who said that he washed dishes with more dexterity than I. She thought for a moment, and then added: "Dexterity is one thing, but the dishes are not as clean as they are when Tianming washes them."

Lan Yu not only spoke a lot, but could also express himself well. He sat between Master and Teacher Mom, telling stories of strange occurrences in his hometown of Wood Village. Teacher Mom was enchanted by his tales, laughing with a hearty *haha*. Even Master, who always seemed to be pulling a long face, would occasionally allow his

frown to relax. I was not a glib talker like Lan Yu, so I would just sit beside them inattentively. It seemed that Teacher Mom took notice. She said to me, “Tianming, is it that you’re missing home? If you’re homesick, just go back for a visit.” While she said this, her eyes were trained on Master. I thought that this was a decision that she actually couldn’t make, so she was soliciting Master’s opinion. But as soon as she had mentioned home, my eyes immediately felt hot. I really did miss home. I missed Mother and my two little sisters, and they were also most certainly missing me.

I gazed unflinchingly at Master. After what seemed like half a day, he finally said, “Leave soon and return soon.”

And in that way, I returned to Water Village.

Before, I had believed that Water Village was lousy in every way. But this time, as soon as I set foot within the boundaries of Water Village, I discovered that everything was perfect. The mountains in Water Village were taller than those in Earth Village, and the land was greener. Even the people seemed better-looking.

When I walked into my family’s courtyard, Mother was squatting under the eaves chopping greenfeed for the pigs, and Father was standing on a ladder thatching the roof of the house. When she set eyes on me, Mother threw down her work and ran over to rub my head and my face, saying, “Tianming has come back, and he’s gotten so skinny.” The pungent smell of grass wafted from Mother’s hand, but I thought it was particularly sweet-smelling, for I hadn’t seen Mother’s face for so long. It seemed that she had grown quite a bit darker. As I looked at her, my eyes grew blurry.

“Bencheng, Tianming’s back,” Mother called to Father.

Father didn't come down from the ladder. He turned at the waist to peer at me, then went back to thatching the roof. "Okay, so what have you come back to do?" Father's voice slid down the ladder.

"Master let me come back," I stretched my neck as I spoke.

"What? You bastard, you're like lousy mud paste that won't even stick to a wall," Father sent a wooden plank sailing down from high above. It shattered into several pieces.

"He's a good kid, what are you doing cursing him?" Mother countered.

"Good? Would a good kid be sent home by his master?" Father descended the ladder, whipping out a hand and charging at me angrily, "You… you… you…" Father's voice sounded as if he had chewed it to bits and was now spitting it out.

At night, Mother made me a pot of cured meat and didn't allow my sisters to eat much of it, risking Father's wrath to place the most delicious cuts of meat into my bowl. At the table, Father was continuously giving me the stink-eye, as if he wanted to swallow me whole. "When are you going back?" Mother put the last piece of meat in my bowl as she asked me.

"Leave soon and return soon, that's what Master said," I responded.

"Really?" Father cocked his head and asked.

I nodded. At this point, Yo Bencheng of Water Village finally smiled and used his chopsticks to lightly rap on the back of my head. I realized that all throughout dinner, Father's chopsticks had not reached into that bowl of meat. I took that last piece of meat that my Mother had passed to me and placed it in Father's bowl. Father smiled even more happily, saying, "Respect is not as important as obedience."

The moon rose, and my two sisters went to bed. I sat in the courtyard with Father and Mother, telling them all about Earth Village.

“Pop, do you know what is better than four-piece and eight-piece suona troupes?” I asked Father.

Father smiled, then looked at Mother, who also smiled.

“Maybe there’s also a sixteen-piece?” Father guessed.

I shook my head and said, “The greatest suona performance is actually a solo! Do you know what it’s called?”

At this moment, I noticed that Father’s grin disappeared, his gaze shifted up to the moon, and his expression became convoluted. After a long time, he returned his gaze to me and said, “Do you know why I sent you to study suona?”

I shook my head.

“Just so that you could learn to play “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix.”

I was stunned, and excitedly said, “So you knew “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix” all along!” I also expressed my commitment, saying, “Don’t you worry, when I’ve learned it, I’ll come back and play it for you.”

“It’s not that simple. In the past ten years or so, your master has taken in no fewer than twenty pupils, but not a single one has learned to play “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix” Father stated.

“Is it hard to learn?” I asked.

“That’s not it at all. That tune is suona players’ stock-in-trade. But in each generation, a master will only pass it on to a single disciple. That disciple must have extraordinary talent and must be of high moral standing. So learning to play that song is

an extremely special privilege. The tune is only performed at funerals, and only performed on behalf of the most upstanding person. Ordinary people are not worthy of such a song."

"Can our Tianming learn to play it?" Mother asked.

Father shook his head and walked off. Mother and I were left alone in the courtyard with the waning moon.

6

When I returned to Earth Village, I discovered that Lan Yu had already sucked up the water from the river bend.

As soon as I walked in the door, Lan Yu eagerly accosted me with questions about how long it had taken me to suck up water with the long reed. I counted on my fingers, calculating that it had taken me a little more than a month and a half. "It took me ten days," Lan Yu said proudly.

Feeling somewhat dejected, I admitted, "Master has said before that you are more talented than I am." Lan Yu just patted my shoulder and said, "You're really good too."

But I discovered that I was really not good at all.

Originally, once Lan Yu successfully sucked up the water, he was sent to the fields with me, but after he had worked there for a few days, the situation changed. I clearly remember that there was an especially thick, defiant fog that day, and all of Earth Village disappeared from sight. I yet to rise from bed when I heard Lan Yu's piercing shout. I turned over, hoping to sleep a while longer. Lan Yu always got up before I did. He even got up before Master and Teacher Mom did, and for this, he received Master's praise. To tell the truth, I also wanted to get up early like he did

because I also wanted Master's praise. But I just couldn't get up, and when I would press my forehead against the mat and drag myself upright, I would feel groggy and heavy, and the whole world would spin for a while. Later on, I just wouldn't get up, didn't care about praise, and would express gratitude to the Amitabha for every extra moment I was allowed to rest.

"Get up! Get up quickly, Earth Village has disappeared!" Lan Yu ran in and shook me.

"En!" I mumbled, ignoring him.

"Tianming, Earth Village is gone!" He proceeded to yank off my covers.

Helpless, I thought I might as well get up. When I walked outside, I discovered that Earth Village really had disappeared.

That was the thickest fog I have ever seen in my life. The sky and the ground had all been swallowed up. Even Lan Yu, who was standing right in front of me, had completely vanished. It was an eyeful of white dampness. I had never seen such imposing fog, and even my breathing felt labored. I pulled Lan Yu close to me. He was using both of his hands, risking his life in an attempt to wrangle the whiteness in the air, flailing like a giant spider trapped in its own web.

"Come in you two," Master called from inside.

Lan Yu and I tumbled into the house. Master said, "Today, the fog is too thick for you to go work in the fields. Fortunately, I have some things to explain to you."

From under the bed, Master pulled out a rusty metal case. When he opened the case, Lan Yu and I drew near to look. The lighting in the room was poor, so we could only get an impression. As it turned out, the case was full of suona horns. Big and small,

long and short suona horns. Master bent over and continuously rummaged through the instruments in the case, inspecting each one, choosing one, discarding one, until finally, he pulled out a relatively short suona. He stuck it in his mouth and released a long sound—*wuuuuuuu*. Master straightened his back and handed the suona to Lan Yu, who was standing next to me. He said, "Starting from today, you no longer need to go work in the fields. Concentrate on playing the suona. First learn how to make sound properly, then I will teach you some simple tunes."

I have no way of describing Lan Yu's expression at that moment. The instant that he received that suona, two beams of light seemed to shoot through the dim room. They appeared to emanate from Lan Yu's eyes. I could see that the hand that grasped the suona was shaking lightly. Next, he clumsily stuck the instrument in his mouth and puffed out his cheeks. The suona sent forth a sound like a wet fart. He blew again, producing yet another wet fart.

I thought that Master would certainly give me a suona next, maybe even a long one, longer than Lan Yu's. I just stared at Master's hand, hoping that he would grab another suona, test its sound, and give it to me. But I wasn't as unselfconscious as Lan Yu, who was putting out all kinds of wet farts right there for everyone to hear. I would go find a private place to fart in secrecy.

Master did pick up another suona, but he did not stop after just one. He would pick up each instrument, blow into it, wipe it down with his sleeve, then return it to the case and choose another to test. My eyeballs were stuck to him, hoping that each successive suona would be mine. When he started to look at the shorter ones, I felt a bit fearful that he would give one of those to me; I wanted one that was longer than Lan

Yu's. But as the horns remaining in the case became fewer and fewer, my heart started to contract. I thought that even a short one would be fine. Even one as long as my thumb would be acceptable.

With a *plink*, Master latched the case closed.

I hadn't gotten to play the suona. At night, I told Lan Yu that I wanted to go home. He said, "Didn't you just return from home?"

I said, "I don't want to study the suona anymore. Now I know that Master is really dissatisfied with me."

The summertime in Earth Village was not as beautiful as it is in Water Village, but autumn was actually quite pleasant. Even though the mountains there were a bit small, they were all covered in trees of all varieties. Evergreens and leaf-dropping maples all huddled together. During the summer, the mountains were a swath of green, but when autumn arrived, the maples seemed to fall under a spell. Then, red and green mottled hills stretched into the distance, lining up like a lively ellipsis. I carried my bag on my back and followed the ellipsis, crying as I walked. I felt incredibly heartbroken. I had been in Earth Village for such a long time, but I had never gotten to play the suona. Rather, I had merely become the Jiao Family servant. I thought that returning to Water Village without ever having touched a suona would surely earn me everyone's ridicule. Also, I was most worried about Father. I was not so bothered by the fact that my shameful homecoming would result in a beating; I was more concerned that Father might die of anger.

I walked stealthily. From that day when the fog swallowed Earth Village, I had wanted to leave. The night before my departure, my junior classmate Lan Yu had crawled onto my bed to play suona for a while, giving me a sidelong look as he played, the

corners of his eyelids rolling upward with pride. I knew he was showing off in front of me, but I didn't hate him for it. If I had been in his place, I would have wanted to show off too. Lan Yu had a big head, so he was very smart. He could already play all of the funeral songs Master had taught him well enough to make my eyes well with tears. When he would get to a point of interest in a tune, he would stop and lecture, "This is a glissando, this is a major key." Every day when I would go down to the fields with Teacher Mom, Lan Yu would follow me to where ever I was working, scurry up a hay bale like a monkey, and start tooting away on his suona. On the road home, my whole body would always feel so weary that I would sway from side to side, but Lan Yu would leap and jump with abandon, as fresh as the green grass flecked with morning dew.

I left, and nobody was aware. When I had departed, Lan Yu was still cuddling his suona in bed, talking in his dreams. I had originally wanted to stay goodbye to him, but then I worried that he might make a scene in his surprise and rouse Master and his wife. When I went through the door, I realized that the sky had yet to turn light; everywhere I looked, I encountered darkness black enough to make my heart thump rapidly. I groped around under the eaves and sat down. As soon as I had sat down, I thought about the time I had spent in Earth Village, thought about Master and his wife. Teacher Mom was a good person, like my Mother. When we were in the fields, she wouldn't let me work too hard, and at meals, she would always put extra food in my bowl. The person I was least reluctant to leave was Master. I had secretly given him the nickname "Charcoal Jiao". Charcoal Jiao lacked all kindness, pulled a long face all day long, and didn't allow me to play the suona. After I had ruminated for a while, I realized that I had mixed feelings. I felt a choking sensation in my throat and I started to cry, whimpering quietly up until the

time when a gentle light spread through the sky and I could see the road home. I finally stood up and left, looking back every so often as I went, causing more tears to stream down.

Finally leaving Earth Village, I realized that the thing I feared most in this life was not being able to become a suona master. I recalled the promise that I had made to Father and Mother the last time I was home, that I would definitely learn "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" and play it for them. But in the situation at hand, not only had I failed to learn "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," I could not even play the sloppiest funeral song. I felt that the person I had wronged the most was Yo Bencheng of Water Village, who had put his heart and soul into sending his son to study suona. Yet, his son had studied almost half a year and had not even had the opportunity to use the suona to blow out two wet farts. Wouldn't this make the people in Water Village laugh until their teeth fell out? I felt miserable again for a while, but not enough to abandon the idea of returning home. After all, if I arrived home too late in the morning, I would accomplish nothing. Returning late was not as good as returning early. If I returned early, I could still give my family members a hand with the morning chores.

I saw Water Village once again, spread out between the sky and the earth, as peaceful as a child deep in sleep. After turning one more bend in the road, I would arrive. I was traveling on the path through the valleys, which was narrow and winding, like a long rope of chicken intestines tossed onto the mountains. A row of firethorn trees stood along one side of the path, crowding towards the road in confusion and disorder. It would not be long before the road would disappear altogether.

When I came around the bend, I heard the sound of voices below. Standing on my tiptoes, I saw an old village uncle supervising a group of people as they helped him thatch his new house. My father, Yo Bencheng of Water Village, was among the workers. I quietly wove my way through the firethorn trees, squeezing myself in between clumps of tall grass.

"Tianming hasn't been home recently?" the old village uncle asked Father.

"He's busy playing! He can play many tunes." Father replied loudly.

"In the past, I hadn't recognized that Tianming was suona-playing material," the old village uncle said.

"Tianming is much better than I ever was. I don't often see that kid complain, and he's never careless." Father continued, "When he came back not too long ago, he plainly promised his mother and me that he would play 'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix!'"

The old village uncle laughed for a bit, knowing that my father was boasting. He said, "'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix!' 'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix!' I haven't heard that for many years. The last time I heard it must have been well over ten years ago. When Great Teacher Xiao of Fire Village passed away, Old Jiao the Third played it once. But I still remember that occasion to this day. The Great Teacher's family members and students were kneeling, packed into the courtyard, while Old Jiao the Third sat in an armchair in front of the coffin playing calmly. Oh, that chirping bird sound was so lifelike!"

"Once Tianming learns to play it, I'll have him come back and play for all of you," Father promised.

"That would certainly add to the glory of Water Village and would be a great honor to you, Bencheng. I'm just worried that Tianming might not be so lucky. This 'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix' is only passed on once in a generation," the old village uncle said.

"You all don't have to believe in Tianming, but I believe in my kid," Father responded.

Like a snake, I slithered back up through the grasses, no longer wanting to return home. I wanted to play the suona like never before.

I followed the road back up to the top of the mountain, where I turned my head to look back at Water Village. Near and far, I could see thick smoke coming up from the chimneys. Water Village had awakened.

When I returned to Earth Village, Master was in the courtyard sharpening a knife. Seeing me standing below the wall of the courtyard scared out of my wits, Master said, "Teacher Mom went down to the fields. You go too!"

7

Master did eventually give me a suona. It was a small one. The mouthpiece was made of reeds, the bell was made of brass, and the body was made of white wood. The brass bell was a bit discolored. I caressed it. This suona was smaller than Lan Yu's, but I was already quite satisfied that I was worthy enough to play. I was grabbing my thigh so hard that my whole leg grew fairly sore.

"That was the first suona my master gave me," Master said as he squatted at the door, smoking his pipe. "Don't focus on the fact that it's small. It plays high notes. Suona

horns are just that way. They higher they play, the smaller they are," Master exhaled a mouthful of smoke as he spoke.

I nodded my head. The image of Master sitting at the door slowly grew fuzzy. Winter had nearly arrived and Earth Village came alive with activity. All day, my junior classmate Lan Yu and I disturbed Earth Village with our *wuwu lala* noises. Next to the river bend, on the hay bale, and on the big green rocks on the west side of the village, one could hear squawking suona sounds. Those squawking sounds were mostly produced by me, as Lan Yu could already play music that was pleasant to the ear. When Lan Yu would play, residents of Earth Village would stop and listen carefully. After listening, they would shout from afar, "The Jiao Family Troupe now has a successor!" But I didn't get that kind of treatment. Anyone who would happen to pass me while I was playing would take off running, making Lan Yu and I laugh heartily.

Master was very stingy, and he would teach us pitifully little during each lesson. I would have to practice each tune for ten days or more.

Soon, the Jiao Family Troupe accepted another job. The night before the event, the troupe members gathered around the fireplace. Mushroom cap tea and fried soy beans appeared on the wooden table once again. Lan Yu and I each clutched our horns and sat in the midst of the group, our blood boiling hot with anticipation. We had finally become members of the Jiao Family Troupe. Perhaps it would not be long before we could join our elder classmates on a journey to a faraway place.

After everyone performed, Big Brother Classmate said that we two young pupils had been with Master for a while and should also play a song. I was rather apprehensive, since I played really badly. I suggested, "Let my junior classmate go first." Lan Yu didn't

decline. He competently rolled up his sleeves and lifted his suona in both hands, tilting the instrument forward a bit and gently placing the reed in his mouth, just like someone who had practiced for a lifetime. Lan Yu truly played well, about as well as our senior classmates. He played a wedding melody, the notes bouncing around the walls lightly and joyfully, the tune swaying from side to side with the movements of his head. He enlivened the whole room with his music.

When he finished, Big Brother Classmate rubbed his head, saying, "Amazing, amazing." The other senior classmates also commended Lan Yu. Only Master remained silent as he took long drags of his pipe.

After Lan Yu had played his piece, the roomful of people looked at me. My heart was thumping and the hand that was clamped down on my suona began sweating profusely. Second Brother Classmate nodded at me. I knew he was trying to encourage me. Trembling, I stuck the suona in my mouth, and tooted out a *wuwu!* I played a few glissandos and a few trills, then hung my head and murmured, "That's all I can do."

The room fell silent. Only the flame of the oil lamp lightly flickered. My senior classmates all shot grave looks in Master's direction. Master was still smoking with his head bowed. After an interminable length of time, Second Brother Classmate addressed Master in a low voice, "Master, congratulations." Master used the leg of the stool to extinguish his pipe and said, "Okay, that's enough for today, so get out of here. We have a long way to travel tomorrow!"

I had no idea why Second Brother Classmate had wanted to congratulate Master. I had played so terribly. After such a long time, I could still only play some basic notes.

Master always wore that unyielding face, refusing to give me more than a few phrases to practice each day.

And with those few phrases, I played well into wintertime.

The first snow of the year finally arrived. The clouds hung pregnant for several days before the snow finally fell one night. At midnight, Lan Yu and I both heard the sound of snowflakes brushing against the windowpane. We couldn't fall asleep. Our sleeplessness was not actually because we had been awaiting this snowfall. We opened our eyes wide in the darkness, anticipating that exciting moment when the sky would lighten. The evening before, as the Jiao Family Troupe huddled around the fireplace after playing a final song, Master announced to everyone: "Tomorrow, Tianming and Lan Yu will go with us!"

Lan Yu opened the window and said to me, "Snow is falling. I wonder if it's falling in Wood Village too."

I said, "It's definitely falling in my Water Village. Every year at this time, it snows a lot. The snow fills the sky and the fields, flying everywhere, burying the whole village."

I got up very early, hastily wiping my face and carefully wrapping up my suona. I packed the suona in a brilliant green cloth bag that Teacher Mom had sewn for me. The suona just fit inside; the size of the bag was perfect. Lan Yu also had a cloth pouch made of dark blue cotton. I eventually learned that Lan Yu's bag had been made from a pair of Master's underwear. I never told Lan Yu this secret, especially since I later discovered that my bag had been fashioned from a pair of Teacher Mom's panties.

Today's engagement was a funeral. Just as I had finished packing my suona, our hosts came to fetch us. The two people who came for us were both youths, not much older than Lan Yu or me. They had some newly-grown fluff by the sides of their mouths. The boys stood timidly at the edge of the courtyard, carrying bamboo baskets on their backs. Our town of Second-to-None had the tradition of sending hosts to collect the suona troupe. Hosts were responsible for carrying the musicians' items. Once the event was over, the hosts also had to accompany the troupe back home.

Seven of my senior classmates soon arrived, which told me that our hosts had booked an eight-piece; seven senior classmates plus Master made eight. Of course, Lan Yu and I could not join in yet, even though Lan Yu was actually skilled enough. Master had said, "First come along once, then we'll see."

Our hosts quickly put gongs and drums in their large packs. When they saw that Lan Yu and I were still clutching our horns to our chests, they stretched out their hands and said, "Pack them up." I refused, saying that I could carry mine on my own. After all, it wasn't heavy. The hosts would not yield, saying, "Where's the sense in a suona master carrying his own things? Our Metal Village doesn't have that kind of rule, and neither does any place in Second-to-None."

From beside me came Master's voice. "Give it to him. One must follow the rules."

Our hosts' surname was Cha, just like practically every other family scattered about Metal Village.

We were led into an uninhabited room. Our quarters were quite tight, and we were also sharing space with two charcoal braziers. I had not even warmed my buttocks when

Master said, “Prepare your instruments, sound the gong!” He then headed out to the courtyard.

I finally had the chance to see suona masters give a real eight-piece performance with my own eyes. The Jiao Family Troupe fanned out around the courtyard and took their seats with Master in the middle. Master’s gaze swept from side to side. The audience took notice but continued preparing for the affair at hand. The gong crashed, and the Jiao Family Troupe’s performance in Metal Village began. There was a big difference between the sound of the suona horns on that day and the sounds I had heard during the practice sessions. Master and his apprentices played with all their might. The sound of the suona horns dashed into the high, wide sky. First was a grand orchestral piece, deep and mournful. Then came Master’s solo. It was the first time I had ever heard Master play by himself. The heartbreaking notes that came from the bell of his instrument floated up naturally, ceaselessly, expressing the desperation of impending death, the clouded vision and muddled sense of direction as the departed entered the afterlife, and the lonely sighs and tears. Those tears were remarkably true to life. A gust of wind passed through, ruffling the white flag of mourning hanging by the side of the courtyard and scattering the mournful tones of Master’s suona. The heavens and earth suddenly stood cold and lifeless.

The group of people who had been laboring in the courtyard came over. No one said a word. All gazes were fixed on Master’s suona. A few wails slowly arose, emitted by some dutiful relatives. In a short time, the sound of crying expanded, as if the sense of tragedy was contagious and had pervaded the courtyard. Those with a connection to the

deceased and those who never even knew him all found their faces dripping with tears after hearing Master's song.

When Master finished his tune, someone handed him a bowl of hot, boiled water and said, "Master Jiao, we appreciate your efforts. Please wet your throat a bit."

When dinner started, the host came over. He first tearfully kowtowed to Master, saying, "Despite this freezing air and snowy ground, you all still came to help see off my old dad. I thank you."

He lifted himself from the ground and said, "He was the head of our Cha family before I was even born. He was virtuous and well-respected!"

Master nodded his head.

"He did so many good deeds, I can't even count them," the host added.

Master nodded again.

"Master Jiao, I'm sorry to trouble you, but do you think you could play 'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix?'" the host stretched his head toward Master and inquired.

Master shook his head.

"Money is no problem!"

Master still shook his head.

Even after being prodded for quite some time, Master still shook his head and said nothing. The host was rendered helpless, and could only heave a sigh and walk off. When he reached the door, he turned his head and cast one last question: "My old dad really won't have such luck?"

Master raised his head and said, "Go make yourself busy!"

When the host departed, Second Brother Classmate looked at Master and said, "Master, Old Grandfather Cha was quite venerable!"

Master made a snorting sound in his nostrils: "Do you know why Cha is the most common name in Metal Village? Before, Cha wasn't the only name here. But all of the other families left, scattering into various parts of the Town of Second-to-None. This is all Old Grandfather Cha's doing!"

For the next few days, Lan Yu and I were in heaven. We ate meal after meal of meat, during which the two of us even drank warm wine. When the Jiao Family Troupe played in the courtyard, Lan Yu and I would hide in a room and smoke cigarettes. The cigarettes were secretly given to us by the host. We had originally refused them, but the host had insisted.

On the day we departed, some of the sons of the deceased traveled a long way back with us. When parting on the bridge, a son gave Master a wad of cash. Master rejected the payment, resulting in a lengthy, cordial struggle between the two. Finally, Master reluctantly received the money.

A few of my senior classmates stiffly watched from the side. Their gazes revealed boredom, for they had already witnessed the scene that unfolded before them plenty of times.

8

Spring arrived.

In the countryside, springtime has always been associated with countless ceremonies. Take, for example, our Town of Second-to-None. As soon as spring would appear, we would celebrate the Bow Valley Festival. The night before sowing the grain

seeds, villagers of every age would take all sorts of sacrificial gifts to the largest rice paddy in the village and make offerings to the Grain God. Only a few days after the Bow Valley Festival, the day would arrive for us to welcome the Kitchen God, during which time nobody skimped on offerings of pig heads and millet slag. Old people often said that because there is no millet slag in heaven, when the gods come down to walk amongst people, they rely on those bits of food for sustenance. After properly preparing for the Kitchen God, we had the Flower Sunning Festival. We would pay homage to Grandfather Sun and the Flower Immortal at the same time. Because there were two gods, there had to be a lot of sacrificial offerings, such as honey, rice, dried chrysanthemums, and round corn cakes. Before the sun appeared, villagers would go to a place where they could view the sunrise and set out their offerings. When the blood-red sunlight would appear, everyone would gather together and kowtow with their hands folded in front of them, reciting auspicious phrases. The farmers were never ambitious; they only asked the gods for a good harvest.

When the Flower Sunning Festival had passed, Earth Village grew lively once again. People gathered around Old Jiao the Third's courtyard like chains of pagoda flowers, moving stools and tables. When travelers would stroll past on the road, someone would call out, "Old Jiao the Third is going to hand down the sound!" As soon as the folks on the road heard this, their faces would come into full bloom, and they would wriggle their ways into the crowd. Old Jiao the Third's courtyard became a labyrinth of villagers.

The people of Earth Village had already waited a long time for this fateful day.

In each generation, Second-to-None's suona troupe would have only one leader. There was always a special ceremony when last generation's leader would pass on his responsibilities to a new leader; this ceremony was called "passing down the sound". The "sound" being passed was none other than that song which so few people in Second-to-None had been fortunate enough to hear: "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." The disciple who received this privilege would be able to establish an independent troupe and take in disciples of his own. He could also use his name for his troupe. For example, someone with the surname Zhang could call his suona troupe "The Zhang Family Troupe"; or a Wang could start "The Wang Family Troupe". Overall, this was not only a sign of one's skill, but also a great source of pride; it was the most powerful footnote to a suona master's artistic offerings. Members of all of the five villages in Second-to-None hoped they could produce such a person to bring them honor.

The most attractive aspect of this ceremony was not its rarity, but its secrecy. Before the start of the ceremony, nobody knew who would be the next generation's suona king. Therefore, all of the members of the Jiao Family Troupe had to attend the event. Even their family members would all come from afar to participate, since just about anyone could be named.

In fact, there were too many people there, and they could not all fit into Master's courtyard. Even the trees surrounding the courtyard were filled with onlookers. My classmates and I sat in the center of the courtyard with our parents on either side. My parents and little sisters were there. My junior classmate Lan Yu sat next to me. His parents were also in attendance, and had even arrived a bit earlier than my parents. Their faces were full of uncontrollable anticipation and excitement.

An old-fashioned Eight Immortals table stood under the eaves. Under the table was a fat, freshly slaughtered pig. This pig was an offering of sorts; after the ceremony, all of the people of Earth Village would spend a meal worshipping with their teeth. In front of the pig was a brazier with paper spirit money still smoldering inside. Master stood behind the Eight Immortals table, quietly puffing on his pipe. Master was always very particular about his tobacco. The leaves had to be especially dry, such that when he smoked them, they would produce a thick haze above his head. Soon, Master's face had disappeared, and half of his body was concealed behind a foggy barrier. I suddenly had the faint notion that I was watching a spirit stepping into a cloud.

After a while, Master finally stood and extinguished his pipe with poise. Facing the crowd, he stretched out his hands and pushed his palms downward. The noisy assembly instantly fell silent. After spitting on the ground, Master spoke.

"Soon, I will be too old to play, but our backwater mountain town can't go without suona music. I've played enough. I've tired myself out so that everyone can listen to a few melodies and feel refreshed. So, in this place of ours, we cannot end the tradition of suona. I've pondered this for a long time. I need to find someone who can continue our tradition!" Master coughed twice and paused. The crowd below started to make noise again. At this point, I tried to steal a look at Lan Yu, only to discover that he was also stealing a look at me with a trace of a smile on his lips. When our four eyes met, my face turned red, as if something secret in my heart had been exposed. Lan Yu didn't blush. He raised his head high like a triumphant fighting cock. I felt a bit irritated by his arrogance, thinking that he still hadn't seen the bottom of the matter yet. Who could know if there's actually a stone in the depths of these waters? Then, upon further

reflection, I realized that of all the members of the troupe, Lan Yu was the most fitting choice. He was clever, skilled, and hardworking. If he was chosen after all, I would not have been surprised. Lastly, I thought that my senior classmates were rather pitiable. Why couldn't Master pass down the sound to all of them? That way seemed most fair. Everyone could have a share, and everyone could play "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." There could be a Jiao Family Troupe, a Lan Family Troupe, a Yo Family Troupe; it would be glorious!

Master continued: "In these years, I have taken on many apprentices. Older pupils and younger pupils, all have chances to perform. When they perform, they all make great efforts, and none of them cause the audience to lose respect for our craft." After a moment, he added, "For better or for worse, we suona masters are craftsmen, and since this is the case, we have the responsibility to pass on our skills. Therefore, in the person I seek today, I am not considering how well he plays, but rather, whether playing the suona has penetrated his bones and his joints. A person who has played the suona into his bones is a person who will risk his life to ensure that our craft will not die." Master coughed twice more, then nodded to Teacher Mom. Teacher Mom approached him and handed him a black silk pouch. Master received it and carefully pulled out a suona. Even from far away, I got the sense that that suona was quite old. Even though the brass bell was dazzlingly bright, it was as thin as the wing of a cicada. The neck was made of an old yellow wood. Most suona horns were made with white wood; only the best were made of yellow wood. Such lustrous yellow material proved that this was truly a priceless instrument. People from the countryside usually never get to see such rarities.

"This suona was given to me by my master, and it has been used for five or six generations. This suona can only be used to play one tune, "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." Now as I am passing it on, I am also hoping that we, the people of Second-to-None, can pass it on for generations to come," Master said, lifting the suona.

There was not a single sound in the courtyard. I could only hear the sound of my junior classmate Lan Yu's breathing. All eyes were fixed on the suona in Master's hand. I believe that this must have been the most solemn moment to ever occur in Earth Village. In that kind of silence, the solemnity of the event seemed even thicker. In the end, I could only hear the sound of my own breathing.

I watched my junior classmate Lan Yu from the corner of my eye. His neck was tense, and his head looked like a flower bud on a stem. Slowly, his neck lengthened, and the fresh flower opened. The flower was anticipating the falling rain with anxiety and yearning billowing through its tender petals. But suddenly, the fresh blossom withered. As if in the blink of an eye, this flower that had been preparing to welcome the breeze in full bloom faded away in silence, its petals collecting a layer of dust, its stem worn down to half its original size. This flower that had pulsed with vitality just a moment ago had instantly filled with the color of hopelessness. Sadness swelled from within my heart. My junior classmate Lan Yu had quickly deteriorated before my eyes. As his gaze slowly turned towards me, I could understand his expression of disbelief, bitterness, desperation, and certainly, even hatred. But the hatred I saw was very minimal, very flimsy, in bits and pieces.

At this moment, my father, Yo Bencheng of Water Village, came to my side and shouted: "Are you daydreaming?! Master called you!"

Father's reaction was like that of someone who had cast a spell while playing with a toy wand, full of shock and pleasant surprise.

9

Lan Yu left, draped in the splendor of the rosy clouds at dawn, headed in the direction of the sunrise. I stood on Earth Village's dirt wall, watching his form slowly become small and indistinct. The sun would surely rise again tomorrow, but at that time, I would no longer see my junior classmate Lan Yu. To me, the circumstances under which Lan Yu appeared and disappeared seemed incredibly random. It was as if Lan Yu was destined to appear before me on that rainy day, and was destined to leave on that radiant morning.

Dinner the night before had been especially rich, and had included Teacher Mom's specialty, potato soup. Teacher Mom's potato soup called for tomatoes, but tomatoes are not called "tomatoes" in Second-to-None, they're called "hairy peppers". And the special hairy peppers of Earth Village are the small cherry variety. Teacher Mom stirred chopped hairy peppers and potatoes together and added half a spoonful of pork oil. The color was blood red and the flavor was sour, stimulating the appetite. Besides this, we also had Lan Yu's favorite "ashy greens", which are served in a cold and pickled dish. I had never seen that kind of wild green in Water Village, and Lan Yu said that he had never had it in Wood Village. The tender ashy greens were dipped in boiling water, air-dried, then coated in dressing. Surprisingly, they had the flavor of fresh meat.

At the dinner table, Teacher Mom was constantly putting food in Lan Yu's bowl. Practically the whole dish of ashy greens ended up in front of Lan Yu. Lan Yu was very pleased with himself and kept curling his lips at me while purposefully making loud

chewing noises. Master ate without a sound. Every move he made was extremely careful, such that one would not notice his presence at the table. I only saw him draw attention to himself when he placed some ashy greens in Lan Yu's bowl. Master's behavior practically caused our jaws to come unhinged. One must understand that this person in charge of the Jiao Family Troupe was not in the habit of putting food in other people's bowls. At the table, he always silently went about his business. He spoke very little, and even when there were guests, he would only utter two phrases: "eat" at the beginning of the meal, and "you've had enough" when the guest put down his bowl. Master noticed that Lan Yu and I were surprised, and he said to Lan Yu, "Eat up, only Earth Village has these kinds of ashy greens."

I suddenly had a strange premonition. This premonition was finally confirmed after dinner.

As usual, Master sat under the oil lamp and had a smoke, and Lan Yu sat before him.

"Before you sleep, tidy up your things. Head home first thing tomorrow morning!" Master said to Lan Yu.

Lan Yu dropped his head and picked at his fingernail. He said nothing.

"You've learned everything you need to know. You're capable of playing for weddings and funerals," Master added.

"Master, what did I do wrong?" Lan Yu asked.

"You did very well. Of all of my students, you are the most intelligent."

"So why do you want to force me to leave?" Lan Yu finally started to cry.

"Our destinies are only aligned up to this point!" Master sighed.

“Lan Yu, don’t cry! When you have free time, come to Earth Village and Teacher Mom will cook ashy greens for you.” Teacher Mom’s eyes were also brimming with tears.

“I play everything better than Tianming, but Tianming gets to learn ‘One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix’. How come I don’t get to?” Lan Yu gnashed his teeth as he spoke. He was too forceful; he picked until blood appeared on the nail of the middle finger on his left hand.

Master’s eyes lit up, then suddenly dimmed again. He stood up and rubbed his buttocks, pipe in his mouth. He put his hands on his back and walked off. When he got to the side of the door, he removed the pipe from his mouth, turned his head and said, “Sleep. There are still things to do tomorrow!” He spoke in Teacher Mom’s direction, but it seemed that he was also giving this message to everyone else in the room.

In bed, I had a lot of things I wanted to express to Lan Yu, but I didn’t know how to best say them. All of the way until morning, neither one of us spoke a single sentence. After the conclusion of the Jiao Family Troupe’s sound passing ceremony, Lan Yu was very depressed for a little while. But it hadn’t taken long for him to recover. He told me that as long as he could stay with Master, he would definitely be able to learn “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix”.

I believed Lan Yu. I knew that Master was passing "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix" to me because he thought I was sincere, and not passing it to Lan Yu because Lan Yu was too crafty. Actually, Master had made the wrong choice. Lanyu was more skilled than I. It's also true that he was much more cunning than I, but what's wrong with a person being a bit cunning? I had truly hoped that Master would teach Lan

Yu "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix", and I told Lan Yu as much. However, Lan Yu was not grateful; he even blamed me for his woes!

But now Master was forcing Lan Yu to leave. In the end, even my junior classmate's last wish was not fulfilled.

When Lan Yu left, Master was nowhere to be found. Lan Yu looked for him around the house, and when it became clear that he was not there, Teacher Mom said that he must have gone to the fields. So Lan Yu simply went out to the courtyard and kowtowed to Teacher Mom six times, saying, "Teacher Mom, I'm bowing to you six times, three times for you and three times for Master." Teacher Mom lifted Lan Yu to his feet as tears fell from her eyes. Lan Yu then departed, carrying a sack over his shoulder, turning away fiercely and leaving me with nothing but a gaunt shadow.

10

I cannot remember the exact year that the Yo Family Troupe was founded. I think I must have been about nineteen or twenty that year. In the middle of the night, I often search for the threads of memory and the impressions from the time when I formed my suona troupe. My process of searching for these silk strands of memory really has nothing to do with my troupe itself. Actually, this soul-searching is connected to an unrelated yet crucial event that leaks tenaciously from the cracks in my memory. No matter how I try, it is impossible to block it.

One memory embedded deep in my mind is of the time when my cousin, You Xiuzhi, eloped. Xiuzhi was my fourth uncle's daughter. She was always an honest country girl. She had red cheeks year round, and whenever she encountered a stranger, her cheeks would turn even redder. Before, there had never been anything to suggest that

she would leave Water Village, where she was born and raised. On one ordinary morning, my uncle discovered that his daughter was gone. The whole family searched in panic all day long, but to no avail. Later, someone told my uncle that, at the break of dawn, he had seen Xiuzhi and Zhao Shuisheng heading around a curve by the mountain behind Water Village. Zhao Shuisheng was the son of Water Village's Zhao Laoba. Shuisheng had hardly taken off his toilet training pants when he and his father took a trip to someplace far away. It's been said that it was a big city. When Xiuzhi was in school, she shared a desk with Shuisheng and endured plenty of his bullying. Once, I even beat that bastard on Xiuzhi's behalf!

It was undisputed. Zhao Shuisheng had abducted Xiuzhi.

My fourth aunt cried several times, saying that the Zhao kid had come by during the past few days to see her daughter. The two had hidden in Xiuzhi's room, whispering. When Auntie felt that something was not right, she cursed the Zhao kid. When she had finished cursing the Zhao kid, she cursed her own daughter. And Fourth Uncle went around with a murderous look on his face. Several times, he expressed that he wanted to skin the Zhao kid alive.

However, a year later, things took a turn for the better. Xiuzhi sent a letter saying that she was well, that she was working in a shoe factory in Shenzhen, that her monthly wages were enough to buy a rack of pork ribs. She also took a picture. In the background was a big pond, much bigger than the one in Water Village. Later we came to find out that it was not a pond. It was, in fact, the sea.

I think it's very strange that my memory associates the founding of the Yo Family Troupe with this kind of unrelated event. I often reprove myself at length for this

habit, and try to use other memories to rectify this instability. But when tidying up the threads involving the creation of the Yo Family Troupe, I often fall into even greater danger. This is because this memory lacks even a single brightly-colored strand. On the contrary, this memory is like a wall that falls with a crash, burying me beneath it, alongside my dreams.

I don't know if it was four or five years after Master passed down the sound to me that he gave me his troupe.

That day, Master addressed the roomful of classmates: From today on, Second-to-None no longer has a Jiao Family Troupe, only Yo Family Troupe. A roomful of eyes alighted on me. I was at a loss, and remained motionless. The eyes were all smiling, full of kindness and warmth. But I still felt afraid. I didn't know what to do, what I could do. All I knew was that from that day forward, a roomful of people would have to live together under my tender wings. I thought back to my experience of herding goats at six or seven years old. Father had given me seven or eight goats, and said to me, "They're yours to care for, and if you lose even one, don't even think about eating dinner." I was terrified of the possibility that these goats would spread out all over the mountains and fields, and wanted them to just stay together in a tight circle. On the road, the goats and I discussed this thoroughly. But as soon as they went up a hill, they forgot all of the rules, and their eyes were fixed only on the green grass of the open fields. Where ever the grass was good, that's where they would trot, filling my eyes with a field of white. When it was time to head home, the white had scattered even more. There was nothing to do besides cry.

When that man named Yo Bencheng got wind of Master's news, he was carrying grain baskets along the mountain road in Water Village. He started to run, reporting the same message to everyone he met: "Tianming has taken possession of the troupe! From today, Second-to-None's suona band will be called the Yo Family Troupe." Not only was he proud as he spoke these words, he also felt as if there was a great prophet living inside his mind, prophesizing that a great responsibility had been placed on his shoulders.

Suddenly receiving the troupe was like a dreadful rite of passage for me. From that day on, in my eyes, Water Village lost much of its warmth and lushness. Every branch and blade of grass stood frozen, and those rocks that I once spent all day sliding up and down became pointed and sharp.

11

The Yo Family Troupe's first engagement was at the home of Water Village's Mao Changsheng.

The person who came to hire us was Changsheng's nephew. As soon as he walked into the courtyard, he offered my father a cigarette, which Father smoked with relish, his face full of bliss. This was the first material benefit he had received through his suona master son; naturally, the taste was exceptional.

I had just come out of the house when Father rushed towards me and shouted: "Eight-piece!"

"Do you know who my uncle is? Forget about an eight-piece, a sixteen-piece isn't even up for discussion," the guest said.

Father rolled his eyes at Changsheng's nephew: "Your mother's…, where have you ever seen a sixteen-piece?"

Changsheng's nephew grinned and said, "Isn't Tianming in charge now? We'll make one ourselves! We could arrange a band of nine thousand nine hundred and eighty one musicians, even that would be fine!

Father laughed, and took a deep drag of his cigarette with satisfaction. He leapt off of the long wooden bench where he had been squatting and said, "Well, that's true." I mentioned Master and the names of several other classmates, and Changsheng's nephew bounded off to notify them. Before he left, he offered Father another cigarette. Father accepted the gift, and said, "You bastard, you better walk a little faster. The troupe needs to practice tonight."

My classmates all came, with the exceptions of Master and Lan Yu. Changsheng's nephew claimed that he had bribed and threatened and coaxed until his mouth went dry, but Master had still refused to come. Master gave the excuse that he wasn't agile enough anymore to make the trip. I didn't ask him why Lan Yu hadn't shown up.

My family's home was not big, and many village neighbors came, filling our courtyard to the brim. They all wanted to see the Yo Family Troupe's first rehearsal. Even that old village uncle came. Father gave him a bench to himself and a bowl of strong tea. The old village uncle's smile stretched across his face as he said, "I never would have guessed the suona troupe leader would be that little whelp Tianming. He's usually a quiet kind of kid; you can't even beat a fart out of him, and he plays his suona as loud as a whisper!" Then he turned to me and continued, "One year, your dad told me

that you could play “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix,” but I didn’t believe him. It seems that the Yo Family ancestors are truly giving you good luck.”

My elder classmates said little, but smiled constantly. Father poured a bowl of warm wine for each of them, ceaselessly coaxing, “Drink! Drink! Wet your throats!” It had been a long time since a night in Water Village had been this lively. Our four suona horns howled, *wuwu lala.* After we had finished playing a funeral piece, members of the crowd shouted, “Tianming, play us “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix.” I said, “No, I can’t. It was passed on from my master. I can’t just play that tune on a whim.”

The crowd stood up again and hollered, and the old village uncle shifted his bench so that he was sitting right in front of me. He said, “Just play it, let everyone wash their ears in the music. I heard Old Jiao the Third play that piece once when Great Teacher Xiao passed away. It was fucking unbelievable; it could turn a person’s bones to mush.”

I still shook my head. Father stood behind me and said to everyone, “That’s enough for tonight. There will be many other opportunities in the future. Tianming promises to play it for everyone.”

The old village uncle saw Father speaking. He also stood and agreed, “Right, right, right, we can’t break the rules. There will be many other opportunities. Now get out of here, everybody.”

The crowd dispersed. I said to my elder classmates, “This is the first time the Yo Family Troupe has accepted an invitation, so we can’t fail. Let’s practice a few more times.”

We could see Changsheng from far away. He was standing in the courtyard waiting for us, a snow white mourning garment on his head. When he saw that we had arrived, he gave each of us a cigarette. He also smoked one himself. I asked, "When did the elder pass away?"

Changsheng puffed out a mouthful of smoke and chuckled, replying, "He died three or four times this month. Each time, he would wake from the dead in no time at all. That was until yesterday morning. Now he finally seems to be dead through and through."

The old man by his side gave two dry guffaws, and said, "Changsheng, hurry up and welcome the master properly." He was implying that Changsheng should kowtow to me. Changsheng turned his head to look at the old man and said, "Welcome what goddamn master? What's Tianming to me? We've compared our peckers before!" He turned his head back to smirk at me. I also smiled.

Actually, I had really been hoping that Changsheng would kowtow to me. Changsheng was five years older than I. He was a quick-witted guy, and also bigger than I. When herding cows as children, I was beaten by him on numerous occasions. When he would beat me, he would force me to call him "Dad". I shouted "Dad" more times than I can remember. I had always fantasized about revenge. But then I slowly grew up and became more sensible, and the issue of revenge fell to the wayside. Originally, today had presented itself as an opportunity, but Changsheng still exhibited his usual egotism. Looking back, I remembered that Changsheng was the first person in Water Village to wear a jacket and jeans. In the past few years, family after family had knocked down the mud wall homes that had sheltered them for thousands of years. Then, row after row of

brick houses with white tile edges appeared in Water Village. Changsheng observed that change and drew in a number of people to help him build a brick factory by the side of the river. By the time we went to play for him, many people no longer called him Changsheng; they called him Boss Mao.

Changsheng's treatment of the Jiao Family Troupe fully proved that the epithet "Boss Mao" was not undeserved. Rather than giving each person a cigarette, he scattered cigarettes about liberally. This kind of endless supply of rewards truly satisfied everyone. When I watched the eyes of my senior classmates as they accepted the fragrant cigarettes, I could see that they felt that after spending a lifetime as mariners who trolled for little shrimp and fish, today they had netted a seal.

Afterwards, when we were playing, I could tell that my classmates were really exerting all of their energy. I was actually worried that they would play with such strong force that they would shatter the instruments in their hands. This was especially true when Changsheng would pass by. Big Brother Classmate's puffed out cheeks looked just like his wife's ten-month-pregnant belly.

Other than cigarettes, Boss Mao's generosity was expressed in a number of details, such as the wine used to wet our throats, which was bottled and aged. Another example was our special meal, which even included shrimp. Those red, see-through things seemed to have climbed on the platter in an orderly fashion, and even I stared like a dolt. I had heard of shrimp, these things from the water. Our town of Second-to-None had plenty of water, but our water didn't have any shrimp, only swarms of light green seaweed. But Changsheng's greatest show of generosity had yet to come. When he saw how much effort we were putting into our playing, he would come over and give each

musician a cigarette and say, “Don’t overdo it. If you just play casually, that’s more than good enough.”

On the day that we left, Changsheng didn’t escort us, but he gave each person a handful of money. Big Brother Classmate said that this was the most he had ever received for playing suona. Second Brother Classmate agreed, and added that it was also the easiest job he had ever done.

I held the stack of money and stood on Water Village’s wooden bridge, numbly watching chimney smoke rise from the village houses.

12

When the grains in the fields drooped with a heavy harvest, I went to visit Master.

I once again witnessed Earth Village’s autumn scene, a vast expanse of flat yellow land stretching endlessly towards the sky.

Master had just come back from the fields. It seemed that he was even darker and even thinner. His pant legs were rolled up high. Barefoot, he tapped the ground rhythmically with his sole, sending up a cloud of fine dust. As he walked before me, he pointed the hoe in his hand to the ground and leaned on it, then rested his chin on the top of the handle, looking at me and smiling. He stretched out a muddy hand to rub my head. “Look at your two paws!” Teacher Mom scolded Master. Teacher Mom was also barefoot, and her pants legs were also rolled up. She had just brought out a stool from the house.

I pulled out the things I had brought from Water Village and placed them on the wooden table in the courtyard. There were Master’s favorite tobacco leaves. I had

purchased them while working in Metal Village, since Master had once mentioned that Metal Village produced the best tobacco. There was cured meat, which my father had dried. The color and quality were both good, and the piece I had brought for Master was the pig's rump, which was the most treasured in the eyes of country folks. Finally, there was a bolt of brilliant green cloth that Mother had let me give to Teacher Mom, which was perfect for making a piece of fall clothing.

"You should just visit, no need to come clink-clanking along with such a heaping load." Teacher Mom always had something polite to say.

I sat in the courtyard with Master. At this time, the evening moon was rising, and Earth Village was especially stunning. The gold fronds in the distance surged and seethed in the twilight breeze, and I watched until I was hypnotized. Master pointed into the distance and said to me, "Look at that plot, that one's mine. The grain heads are full enough to snap."

I said, "I know."

Master laughed with a *haha*, and said, "Right, right, you've been down to the field in your time."

I prepared a bowl of the new tobacco for Master. Master took a drag, and then another, and said, "You've bought the wrong kind. The best tobacco in Metal Village is from the bottom of Gaochang Mountain."

"He wants to eat other people's food and then take a shit in the serving dish." Teacher Mom, who was peeling garlic beside us, brought attention to the injustice.

"Sometime in the last few days, your Second Brother Classmate came by for a little while. He said that you've been making a lot of money," Master spat a mouthful of tobacco as he spoke.

"It's not much. It's just that those families who have money have been rather generous!"

"Greed knows no limits!"

During dinner, Master brought over a pot of warm wine.

"It's about ten years old," Master said with excitement, "The Chen family in Fire Village owns a wine shop. That year, when I went to their shop to perform for Grandfather Chen, they didn't mix a single drop of water into the wine."

As usual, Master didn't say a word at the dinner table. He simply dropped his head and slurped up his meal, occasionally raising a wine-filled bowl in my direction. When he would do so, I would also lift my wine bowl towards him. Afterwards, all I would hear was the sound of the warm wine trickling down through the cracks in our teeth.

In all, I had lived in Earth Village for three years and had never seen Master touch a drop of wine. Actually, Master could drink quite a bit. But after pouring down three bowls of warm, bluish wine, Master's face was the color of a pig's liver, and his eyes became especially bright.

But the thing that amazed me most was that after Master finished drinking at the dinner table, he had a lot to say! He said more than I had heard him say in all of my three years in Earth Village. That day, Master said quite a few things that left deep impressions on me. Perhaps this was because when he spoke, he looked like an old wolf. His two

hands were pressed down on the table top, his face was leaned in towards me, and his eyes were filled with a blood-red glow. He said that suona masters must not keep their eyes on those colorful paper bills, but rather, should keep their eyes on the suona within their hands. He also said that suona is not played for the sake of others, but is played for oneself. Finally, my master Old Jiao the Third could not overcome the power of the strong, ten-year-old wine from the Chen Family wine shop. He flopped down on the table. During that moment, as he was lowering his head, his two eyes looked straight at me. He said, "If you have time, go visit your junior classmate Lan Yu!"

When I awoke the next day, Master and Teacher Mom were both gone, and I knew that they had gone down to the fields. This was their life, as rhythmic as the sunrise and sunset. I still felt a bit dizzy. When I walked out of the house, I found that the bamboo platter on the table in the courtyard contained boiled potatoes for my breakfast. In days past, Lan Yu and I would have struggled to get ahold of the biggest potato. Standing atop the ridge, I turned my head to look back at Earth Village. It seemed that it had aged significantly, as if its mountains and waters had yellowed.

13

The Ma family compound appeared more luxurious than it had five years before. The house was like a kid in the midst of a growth spurt; it had sprouted three floors in just a few years. In Wood Village, the Ma family was accustomed to leading by example, and was also accustomed to pulling down those who trailed behind. When the Ma family's former two-story house went up, the other folks in Wood Village were still staving off hunger in their grass hovels, with little hope of ever building a second floor. And then, within a glance, the Ma family home grew to five stories. People of Wood

Village always seemed to be at the Ma family's rear. No matter how hard other villagers tried, they could not surpass the Ma clan. Other than the fact that Old Ma had a good mind, a major reason was that he had four strapping boys. These boys had left home early, and it was said that all of the large cities in China displayed traces of their footprints.

Unfortunately, even Old Ma's strict budgeting could not save him from the miseries of illness. Last year, well before his sixtieth birthday, Old Ma was out on the bridge in Wood Village with his hands on his waist, surveying the landscape. A year later, he stretched out his legs and died. His four sons hurried home for the funeral. Each son had a small car. There were altogether sixteen wheels parked by the road in Wood Village, producing an unusual and confusing sight for the other villagers.

The Yo Family Troupe fanned out in the Ma family's big courtyard. Eight piece, of course it was an eight-piece. As usual, cigarettes, alcohol, and tea were in ready supply. There were even soft, flaky, glistening yellow pastries that dissolving in the guests' mouths. A few of my classmates chatted excitedly. Even Third Brother Classmate, who was usually the quietest, could not shut his mouth. Flustered, he jabbered and tossed delicacies into his mouth. Several times, when he should have been sounding his gong, he was still busy struggling with that mouth of his. I was a bit irritated and hollered at him twice. It was not long before the sound of his gong completely disappeared.

All of a sudden, I felt terrified. From the time that we had entered the Ma family courtyard, nobody had taken notice of the *wuwu lala* of the suona horns. At the beginning, I thought it was because my fellow musicians weren't trying hard enough. I

gave them a few reproachful looks, and soon everyone increased their efforts. Big Brother Classmate was blowing his horn so hard that I feared his eyes would pop out. However, we still seemed to have little impact on our surroundings. People shuttled back and forth through the courtyard for a while. Some little children made a racket. Nobody even looked at us. In the middle of it all, someone knocked over the bottle by Second Brother Classmate's foot. As white sorghum wine poured out, the perpetrator just kept walking past as if nothing had happened.

As I was about to reach out my hand to upright the bottle, I was suddenly blinded.

"Guess, who am I?"

I didn't need to guess. I knew it was my junior classmate Lan Yu. His hands had grown a lot thicker and stronger. His voice had become deep and solid, for his childhood throat had transformed into the throat of a man.

In an instant, my eyes grew misty. In actuality, I had caught sight of him earlier as he mixed within the crowd of people coming and going, his red jacket fluttering. His eyes had also turned in the direction of the Yo Family Troupe from time to time. I had not dared to go over and attempt to reconnect with Lan Yu. I don't know if this was because I lacked the courage or if it was due to of some other reason.

My junior classmate Lan Yu had caught sight of us early on and had not come over, so I simply thought that he was not going to come.

But now he was here covering my eyes with his hands, making me guess who he was.

Lan Yu pulled off his hands, looking at the dampness in his palms with surprise. He then raised his head to look into my eyes, and suddenly, tears also began to run down his face. Lan Yu and I stood facing each other. We were about the same height. The whiskers by the sides of Lan Yu's mouth were thicker than mine. Lan Yu also appeared a bit thinner and weaker than I.

I had a sudden urge to hug Lan Yu. The feeling was strong. Many years before, my family had had a dog with golden fur and short ears. One day, he suddenly disappeared. For the first few days after he left, I thought about him and missed him. But after a while, I slowly started to forget about him. About two months later, that dog reappeared in our courtyard with his fur matted with mud, a broken leg, and eyes full of pain and grief. At that time, I had had a similar impulse. I ran over and hugged that dog, shedding tears.

I looked at Lan Yu and he looked at me. Neither of us made a move.

"Junior classmate!" I shouted.

Lan Yu walked towards me and playfully punched me.

"Have you ever had the experience of losing a dog?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I lost him for ten years altogether!" Lan Yu said.

Our senior classmates' suona horns blared in unison.

At night, Lan Yu didn't go home. He stayed and kept us company. We drank, smoked, and boasted.

After midnight, our senior classmates went to sleep, and much of the crowd dispersed. Lan Yu and I sat in the courtyard. I handed him my suona and told him to play a tune. Lan Yu enthusiastically grabbed the instrument, placed the reed in his mouth, and

then pulled it back out again. He returned it to me and laughed with embarrassment, saying, “Forget it! I haven’t played for so many years, I’ve forgotten all the tunes.” I also laughed and said, “With your brain, you can relearn all of those tunes in no more than fifteen minutes.” Lan Yu grabbed two bowls and filled them to the top with warm wine. We drank until the moon went down and the red glow of the sun appeared, without a single thought of sleep.

Though many years have passed, I can still remember the things that Lan Yu said that night. Actually, every detail about the expressions he wore, the way he cocked his head, the way he nodded with vigor, the way he scratched his ear, and so on, still floats in the sea of my memory. For example, Lan Yu told me, “When I left Earth Village, I was like a wild dog wandering aimlessly through the paths in the fields. I even considered death.” When he mentioned this, he scrunched in his head in in an exaggerated manor, until his head rested on his shoulders. Then, I heard him release a murky sigh from his throat. He added, “I actually didn’t blame Master. He was right to send me home. If he hadn’t returned me, Second-to-None’s suona troupe would have been disbanded long ago. I was unruly. If I wanted to do something, I couldn’t keep to the rules for long. I always had strange ideas about things.”

When he said this, Lan Yu’s neck suddenly stretched outward, as if his head would soon touch the red clouds. I laughed, and when I had finished laughing, I forcefully threw back a mouthful of wine as my face turned the color of the morning sky. My life went through many changes. These changes were as unpredictable as the weather, but before each change, I would see some faint premonitions. Cloudy skies are sure to come before the rain. A sun halo is sure to come before a drought. A moon halo

predicts a period of endless, steady drizzle. That night in Wood Village when I ran into my junior classmate Lan Yu after ten years and had a thorough talk with him, I could vaguely see that, perhaps, my life was at a turning point.

14

Old Ma's four sons were even more generous than anyone had imagined.

The day of Old Ma's internment, a truck rolled into Wood Village.

Old Ma's sons all went to the edge of the village to line up and greet everyone. Several people got off the truck and spoke a few sentences with Old Ma's eldest son. With the flick of the eldest son's hand, a group of young villagers jumped into the truck and started to unload it.

At the beginning, the things they unloaded ended up in a pile, in bits and pieces. People didn't know what to make of it. But as the workers started to scrape it all together, my junior classmate Lan Yu said with surprise, "Damn, it's a band!"

When the Yo Family Troupe fanned out in the Ma family courtyard, I was shocked to discover that all of my classmates were lost in a trance. Their gazes all pointed straight in the same direction, their mouths hanging wide open, as if some sort of miraculous transformation had happened in the immediate vicinity, or as if a castle in the air had cropped up in the distance. Finally, they awkwardly transferred their complicated feelings into simple words.

"What the hell are they doing?!"

"Where the dog-fuck did this come from?!"

"*Aiya!*"

"*Aiyo*…"

Darkness fell and it started to rain. At the beginning, the rain was so light and mild that people barely noticed it. When it fell on the back of my hands and my face I was caught by surprise, but when I tried to brush it off, there was nothing. But the rain slowly grew stronger, and the raindrops grew bigger, to the point that they hurt when they hit bare skin. The crowd started to push into the house, under the eaves, and into the mourning hall.

The band from the city continued working in the rain. Second Brother Classmate watched the soaked people out in the sheets of rain and said, “Why don’t we just murder them?” I gave him a look. Perhaps he realized that this aspiration was a bit too vicious. He corrected himself with embarrassment, saying, “Or just hurting them with a rock would be fine too.” I approved of this, so I kept silent. However, I quickly discovered that, unfortunately, rocks would have very little effect on this band from the city. Old Ma’s eldest son called some people to put up a canvas tent in the courtyard, smiling as he rewarded them with smokes. Our ears were all filled with the sound of him tirelessly giving out cigarettes.

Soon, the band from the city had finished preparing. Their instruments were much more complicated than those used by our eight-piece. From my well-informed junior classmate, I learned that the row of drums on the left was a drum set. The guy standing was holding a thing that looked like a gun, which was an electric guitar. The thing that looked like a chopping board was an electric keyboard. But the thing that surprised me the most was that the guy with sideburns was holding a suona. His suona seemed longer and thicker. Its proportions were not as good as those used in the Yo

Family Troupe, as it was much too dense. I wondered how one could play such a thick suona.

"Ping!" The guitarist used a finger to pluck a melodious note. I can still hear that sound in my dreams, where its appearance always colors my reveries a shade of gray. Every time when I awake, I always rub my head with my hands and wonder why that *ping* sound in my dreams is it no longer a note from an instrument. Why has it magically changed into the strange sounds of things breaking? For example, I would be dreaming of fixing my house and *ping* the house's crossbeam would break. Or, I would have just climbed to the top of a tall mulberry tree and *ping* the big tree would split in two. Or, I would be walking alone by a precipice, and *ping* it would come crashing down on me, bearing its fangs and brandishing its claws.

The only thing of which I was sure was, on that night in the Ma family courtyard, it was as if an exploding sound came from the sky, destroying the old order of things. Something strange surged up from the bottom of everyone's heart, and like those bits of dough left in the wooden bowl in the kitchen at night, it slowly underwent an unknown transformation.

At the moment when the guitar sent forth its mysterious *ping* sound, I noticed with astonishment that everything in the Ma family courtyard grew still. The falling raindrops stopped in midair, producing a spectrum of color under the lamplight. The radishes that the vegetable washing ladies were tossing into a wooden pan also remained suspended in space, their white skins glistening under the lamplight. The candlelight in the mourning hall seemed to instantly come together to form a solid, scorching blaze, as hard as ice. A child who had been running was frozen near the door with his body leaning

forward, one arm swinging forward and the other swinging backwards, like a sculpture carved from flesh. Alarmed, I walked through the scene. I touched the raindrops in midair, and they burst into mist. I stretched out my fingers to flick at the accumulated candle flames, and with a *huala* sound, they scattered into orange bits on the tabletop. I covered my head in misery and squatted in the middle of the courtyard.

"Dong" came a thick sound. Various chaotic noises blotted out the sky and covered the earth, rushing towards me, shaking my ears until they went numb. I stood up and discovered that everything was alive and in motion. The rain continued to fall, the radishes rolled and fell into the wooden pan, the candles burned and flickered, and the child galloped about the courtyard.

"Did you just see something?" I asked Lan Yu?

Lan Yu looked at me and asked, "Did you lose something?" I shook my head. "Then why were you wandering all over the courtyard?"

15

Old Ma's funeral was fresh and unusual.

The people who attended funerals in the countryside were not necessarily overcome with grief, but at least they were solemn. When someone over seventy passed away, this was called a "happy funeral"; the atmosphere could be a bit livelier. Old Ma hadn't even reached sixty, so his funeral could not qualify as an occasion to celebrate. But just the night before he was interred, the Ma family courtyard erupted into an unprecedented joyous sound. Those who had avoided the funeral or had arrived late walked in with a head full of fog, thinking they had come through the wrong gate. It

seemed like the Ma family was welcoming a new bride. Nobody would believe that they were holding a funeral on behalf of a dead relative.

That band seemed to be trying to wake Old Ma from the dead. First, those guys banged out some sporadic *dingding dongdong* notes, and then they started to sing.

The guy tinkering with the guitar played and sang at the same time. In the process of singing, he also swayed his head back and forth. I couldn't understand the lyrics. My junior classmate Lan Yu stood next to me, humming along. I asked Lan Yu what they were singing. Lan Yu replied, "It's popular right now. I can only hum a few lines, can't remember the whole thing. As for what the tune's called, I can't remember that either."

At the beginning, the country folks from Wood Village stood in the courtyard with angry looks on their faces. They weren't used to this kind of thing, and their countenances expressed a reserved dissatisfaction. One old lady fiercely threw down the head of cabbage she was holding with an odd look of ire in her eyes. She grumbled, and looked back at the mourning hall in sorrow. I knew that she was fighting the injustice done to the deceased Old Ma!

Slowly, the glares softened. There were even some young people who, burning with curiosity, circled up close to the band and embraced each other. Whenever the band would play a song they knew, they could not help but sing along.

The Yo Family Troupe stood under the eaves of the house, as inhibited as group of newly married brides. I looked down at the suona in my hand and remembered that we still had work to do.

The rain stopped and the air was incredibly brisk and clean. The stools fanned out in the courtyard for the Yo Family Troupe were still there. We went over and sat down. I looked around at my senior classmates.

"Are we still going to play?" one of them asked.

"How could we not? After all, we didn't just come here to lick the dead guy's dry cock!" I was unusually incensed by his over-cautiousness.

I picked up a bottle next to my foot and took a big swig of wine, as solemn as a soldier about to rush onto the battlefield.

Wuwu lala! Wuwu lala!

The usually bright sound of the suona suddenly seemed weak and immaterial. I made efforts to signal my classmates with a stare. They paid attention. Their cheeks puffed out like drums and their eyes stretched wide like giant pearls. But it still sounded too faint. The band's sound was proud and resounding; ours was like the mournful wails of a dying person. After we finished a song, the faces of my classmates showed utter dejection. We all looked at each other.

"Play! Play to the death! Play those bastards to death!" Lan Yu encouraged us from the side of the courtyard.

We played with all our might, and at the moment when we felt we were losing momentum, we would hear the proud suona whirl up through the cracks in the jumble of sound. We experienced an excited feeling, as if we had just crawled out of the dirt of our own graves, back to life. It was the wild happiness of striking a match in a darkness so thick that we could not see our own fingers before us.

We were all elated. Our opponents' eyes continued to drift in our direction. I could see that their gazes held not only derision and distain, but also loathing. Truthfully, I could accept the content of those uninvited visitors' glares. I even thought they were right to hate that suona in my hand. But I hadn't expected that they weren't the only ones who despised my suona.

At some point, a young person who was especially fond of singing along with the band stood in front of me. He cocked his head and looked at me with a strange expression, as if examining a thousand-year-old corpse that had just been exhumed. I pulled the suona from my mouth and spat on the ground, saying, "What do you think you're doing?"

"How much do you make each time you play?" he asked.

"Does that have anything to do with you?" I retorted.

"I'll pay you twice that, as long as you don't play anymore."

I shook my head and said, "No way."

"Nobody likes the music that you blow out of these long cock-like things."

"Well, I'm still going to play."

At this time, my junior classmate stood up and shoved the young guy. He said, "Liu the Third, what do you think you're doing? Liu the Third, this is none of your business. Liu the Third wants to mind some of my goddamn business, is that it?" The two started to push each other back and forth. Someone came over and subdued them, but at that time, Liu the Third thought of something. He then said, "Oh, I almost forgot! You were originally the player of a busted suona!" and uttered two dry guffaws.

I watched Lan Yu's fist fly past the heads of three people, whistling straight towards Liu the Third's head. A dull thump sounded, and fresh, crimson blood poured from Liu the Third's nostrils. The whole place fell into chaos within a moment. There were shouts, curses, and the hollow thudding of fists pounding into body parts, all in between the frantic sounds of music. It was as lively as a pot of spicy, boiling oil.

The next day, Lan Yu left with us. His head was wrapped in a bandage, and his left eyelid was like a round coal-drying yard. On the ridge behind us, the burial party was climbing the winding mountain path. Like sharp arrows, the sounds of instruments resounded, shooting into every corner of Wood Village.

16

Water Village underwent quite a few changes. Some of these changes were reincarnations, such as the garlic sprouts once again ripening for harvest. Some changes were fresh, different, and inspiring, like the newly-built asphalt road from the village to the county seat. The children frisked about on the new pavement, and vehicles of all sizes seemed to arrive in Water Village just in time. It was as if, within a single night, Water Village and the county seat were drawn together. Before, when villagers wanted to go to the county seat, they faced a difficult task. If they didn't wind through rough mountain roads for five or six hours, they could never get there. Things had improved, and traveling to the county seat became much like dropping in at a neighbor's house for a chat.

At that time, my father Yo Bencheng was standing in our family's large garlic field smiling. In his eyes, the exciting fact that Water Village now had an asphalt road had nothing to do with him. He cared most about his garlic field. This year, the field was

packed full. From the time when the shoots started, everything had gone smoothly, and when it was time to harvest, each plant showed off its strong, thick stature. Each day, Father would go to the field to saunter around and inspect everything, then roll a cigarette and squat on a ridge. There was nothing that made him more satisfied than this.

Father bent to peel garlic. A breeze went by, and I could see his skinny, narrow buttocks. I said, "Take a rest."

He straightened his back and turned his head, his face full of annoyance: "Rest? If I could rest and still have food to eat, then I would have rested long ago!" I didn't respond, regretting what I had just said. I thought that I had best shut my mouth, because with every word I uttered, my father could find some reason to embarrass me.

But I discovered that not speaking was also unacceptable. When I didn't speak, Father would put his dissatisfaction into his gaze and actions and send them my way. During that year, Father always looked at me with doubt and vigilance. I was like a feral cat that was stealing the family's grain, and unluckily, had been caught in the act. As this food-stealing feral cat, I had best to hide my tail between my legs, for fear that my hosts would one day become frustrated and kick me out.

Early summer was the best time of year in Water Village, for at this time, the place was always teeming with life. The sky and water were blue and clear, and the garlic was plentiful. The most affecting thing was that no matter where one walked, every villager's face carried a grin. The people of Water Village were truly unambitious, and a good harvest was enough to please them.

Father didn't speak to me. He simply buried his head in his work, continuing to harvest garlic. I straightened my back. There was not a single wispy cloud in the sky.

Under the sunlight, the interminable garlic field looked like an oil painting. In the distance, Third Uncle waved to me. I had asked Third Uncle to inform my classmates of a work engagement. I don't remember exactly when, but people in Second-to-None eventually stopped paying our suona troupe to appear, and even stopped following the rule of sending hosts to transport our belongings. In three steps and two leaps, I hurried over. I first gave Third Uncle a cigarette. He pulled up a corner of his shirt and wiped the sweat from his face. After he lit his cigarette, he said to me, "I told them all, and only Big Brother Classmate agreed to come."

"And the others? What did they say?"

"What could they say? If they weren't busy, they were sore in this place or that place."

Third Uncle finished delivering his message and left. He had traveled far into the distance when he seemed to remember something. He turned his head and yelled, "Right, and your Second Brother Classmate said not to come looking for him in the future."

"Why?" I asked.

"He said that he's leaving next month."

"Where's he going?"

"I don't know, some big city!"

I turned my head in resentment and caught sight of Father's dark, steely face. His two hands were propped on his hips. He looked straight at me. I dropped my head and walked past him. From behind me, I could hear him laugh coldly. When he had

finished laughing, he said, “You’re going to be by yourself soon, huh? We’ll see how you play then! Even if you play your best, it will just sound mediocre.”

At night, I didn’t have dinner. I just lay in my bed staring at the ceiling. There was a spider hanging there, traveling downwards on his thread. He traveled all the way down to the tip of my nose. I reached out a hand and let the spider crawl into my palm. He crawled up, following my hand and my arm, sometimes heading left, and sometimes heading right. I didn’t know where he was trying to go. Or perhaps he didn’t have any particular goal. He’d just keep climbing up and climbing up, and when he became tired, he would weave a web and settle down. Or, he would be gobbled up by an enemy without a sound. Who cares about the fate of a spider!

In the blink of an eye, the world around me became unfamiliar, even though everything I set eyes upon was actually very much the same. The mountain was still the same mountain, and the river was still the same river. But there were some invisible things that were different. It was much like the river in Water Village; at first look, it appeared placid, but it actually was not. When I was young, I would go down to the river to swim. As soon as I would dive in, I would discover a raging undercurrent.

Once Father went to sleep, I crept out of my room. Mother reheated some food for me. While I ate, she sat by my side as she had when I was young, eyes fixed on me, seeping tenderness.

“You’re going out to work two days from now?” Mother asked.

I nodded.

“Did I hear your dad say that a few of your classmates aren’t going?”

I nodded again.

"*Ai!*" Mother heaved a long sigh, then added, "Tianming, you don't need to play the suona anymore! Do something else. We've got to depend on our two hands to do something or else we can't survive!"

I put down my bowl and turned to face Mother.

"I understand this reasoning, but the year when I was apprenticed to Master, I swore that as long as I have a breath in my lungs, I will continue to play the suona."

"But you see, when you're the only one playing, you can't do it for a living!"

"I'll go visit Master in a couple of days."

17

I didn't go in time to see Master. Master first came to find me.

As soon as Master entered the courtyard, he started cursing: "You bastard Tianming, come out here!"

I came out and saw Master standing in the courtyard. His two feet were covered in mud, and even the hem of his clothing was soiled with muddy splotches. His face was as black as it had been when I first met him, but there were more wrinkles. I could see that he had aged a lot, and a sudden sadness welled up inside me. The leader of Second-to-None's outstanding Jiao Family Troupe had become like a locust tree in winter, a truly dismal sight. But most concerning were his clothes. He wore the same style as before, a button-down shirt. However, his shirt was patched in many places. Patched clothes like these had become uncommon in Second-to-None, but when they did appear, they no longer made people view the wearer as simple and hardworking. Rather, they caused people to unconsciously throw the wearer into the category of the poor and wretched.

I shouted, "Master!"

“Don’t call me Master, I don’t have any disciples like you,” Master fiercely spat on the ground, “At the time, you implied that you would carry on this craft, but how long has it been? Yesterday someone passed the word to me that Second-to-None’s Yo Family Troupe has disbanded, collapsed, won’t even take work when it’s available. From this day on, Second-to-None no longer has suona masters.”

I said, “Master, come in first, let’s speak in the house.”

Master waved his hand: “I dare not go through the door of your mighty temple. Now what place is still worthy enough for you to play suona?”

Mother came out and said, “Master Jiao, no need to worry. Come in and talk. Tianming recently sent someone to inform his classmates that they have a work engagement for the next few days.” As she spoke, mother stared at me.

In a panic, I chimed in, “Right, right, right.”

Master’s anger was somewhat subdued. He put his hands on his back and walked into the house, and without looking at me, said, “If you don’t give me an explanation, I’ll break your goddamn mouth.”

Master sat down and received the tea Mother poured for him, waiting crossly for my account of the situation. When he heard what I had to say, he slammed the tea bowl down on the table furiously.

“I’m going to find them. Those bastards have rebelled.”

When Master went out the courtyard gate, he saw me standing under the eaves and barked: “Have you gone dumb? Am I the leader of the Yo Family Troupe or are you?” I made a sound of understanding and hurried after him.

I followed behind Master. On the road, he didn't say a single sentence, but I could faintly hear him taking in big gulps of air.

Second Brother Classmate was rather surprised by our visit. When we arrived, he was preparing a piece of luggage. He was under the eaves, doing all he could to shove a bundle of clothing into an old snakeskin sack. The sack was too small to hold all of the things Second Brother Classmate needed for his long trip. He tried to scrunch it all down from the opening of the bag into the bottom, letting out strange yelps in his efforts. Second Brother Classmate released a string of curses before lifting his head and catching sight of Master and me. His lips quivered. He wanted to say something, but from the look on Master's face, he pretty much already understood the situation and decided to refrain from speaking. He put down the bag in his hand, straightened his posture and came down from below the eaves. He stood before Master in silence, without making a single noise. Master ignored Second Brother Classmate. After sending a snort out through his nose, he walked straight under the eaves and toted the bag out into the courtyard. He then pulled out all of the objects inside and discarded them onto the ground piece by piece. Master continued these motions for a long time. I was surprised that such a small bag could vomit up so many items. By the time Master stood up straight, the courtyard had turned into a colorful drying yard.

Master put the dry bag underfoot and stamped while staring down Second Brother Classmate. His glare was like the June sun in Water Village, capable of frying a person into a daze.

Second Brother Classmate dropped his head and wrung his hands; he didn't say a word. At that moment, a few sparrows descended from the sky and hopped gleefully

around the clothing strewn about the courtyard. Second Brother Classmate suddenly dropped his hands, walked past Master, and bent down to pick up the scattered clothes, brushing off the dust and hanging them in the crook of his arm. Once his arm was full, he slowly shimmied over next to Master and reached out a hand to pull the snakeskin bag out from under Master's foot. Master didn't move. My classmate held on and kept pulling, using more and more force. Eventually, I could see that Master's body was swaying back and forth. I stood to one side, watching this strange teacher-student pair. They seemed as if they were performing a pantomime in which every look and movement had a profound meaning, and all of the expression was wrapped up in those silent pulling and pushing movements. Then, Master stretched out a leg and viciously kicked at his second apprentice's face. I saw Second Brother Classmate abruptly drop down behind Master, just like the snakeskin bag that had just been emptied. After a while, Second Brother Classmate finally recovered, curling up like a snake and dragging himself up as two streaks of bright red blood wound down from his nostrils, practically passing over his whole face. He didn't completely stand up. As before, he returned to a squat and shuffled over next to master, stretched out his hand to grab the snakeskin sack under Master's foot, and started pulling again.

At this point, I saw my master's face turn a deathly shade of gray. All of his features quivered severely, like a pot of over-boiled dumplings. After some time, he raised his head and gave a long sigh that sounded like the cold winter wind in Water Village, moving over the skin and into the bones, capable of freezing a person's heart stiff. He finally removed the foot that had been stamped down tightly on the snakeskin

pack. He turned around and quickly walked away, leaving me with nothing but a quivering shadow.

18

The road was full of curves, winding and meandering. Little roads in the countryside are always like this, full of sudden roadblocks and vistas, stretching forth and suddenly disappearing. As you follow such a road, you suddenly discover that it's taken you to some particular place. If you look further into the distance from a high point, you can see stretches of unconnected road like a chopped noodle. We were walking along one of those unpredictable roads. My master was in front, followed by Big Brother Classmate and Lan Yu, while I brought up the rear.

From the time Lan Yu left Earth Village, he had never played for any work engagement. On that day, he would stand within the ranks of the Yo Family Troupe, which gave me a strange sort of feeling. I also had no idea how Master persuaded Lan Yu to join us for this particular performance. That day, after leaving Second Brother Classmate's house, Master had rushed straight to Wood Village, and yesterday, Lan Yu had pushed open the door at my house.

On that day, Master was wearing new clothes, with the crease marks still clearly visible. He walked really quickly, like an old yet vigorous wild hare. Lan Yu purposefully slowed his steps so that our group quickly split into two, with Master and Big Brother Classmate in front and my junior classmate Lan Yu and me behind.

Walking by my side, Lan Yu suddenly exclaimed, "Master has gotten old!" I nodded, and he said, "This is my first time officially attending an event, and it's also my last time." I turned my head to look at him, not knowing what he wanted to express. In a

couple of moments, Lan Yu mumbled to himself: “I responded to Master’s request, and he responded to mine.”

My junior classmate was always like that, always making me muddle-headed, always speaking in riddles. I said, “What does that mean?” Lan Yu smiled and didn’t reply. I just lowered my head and pondered this myself. When I raised my head again, I had lost sight of everyone on the quiet mountain road.

In the Town of Second-to-None, compared to the other little villages, Fire Village had always lagged behind. The houses were a hodgepodge of little grass hovels, and the roads were comparatively narrow. But the residents of Fire Village were honest. When people from Second-to-None went to the market to buy eggs, and especially free-range chicken eggs, they would all first ask which village the goods came from. If the eggs were from anywhere other than Fire Village, nobody would buy them. This is because they had all been cheated before. When they had asked, they had been assured that they were truly getting free range chicken eggs. After buying the eggs, they had taken them home and cracked them open, only to discover nothing but white. Only Fire Village eggs were of good quality. The yolks were bright yellow and the price was reasonable.

Today’s engagement was in the west part of Fire Village. It seemed that the family’s financial situation was quite average. Their house had recently been rebuilt, but it was mostly empty inside except for some everyday essentials. It was evident that the home renovation had eaten up all of their funds.

Even though the family was only moderately well-off, things were as lively as ever. This had a lot to do with the deceased. He had been Fire Village’s old branch

secretary. The prestigious old secretary lay in the central room, as peaceful as a sleeping cat. Master went over to respectfully light three sticks of incense. After dinner, our troupe gathered in the main room. I was bored stiff and started looking over the suona in my hand. Master took out his old yellow wood suona and wiped it clean.

Big Brother Classmate put his suona in his mouth to tune it with a *gugu jiji*. Master said, "You all put your instruments away. Today, Tianming plays by himself." After he said this, he passed his newly-shined suona to me.

I was especially surprised. Big Brother Classmate was even more surprised. He even forgot to take the suona out of his mouth.

"Why?" I asked.

"He went to Korea. He suppressed bandits. When he led the people of Fire Village in repairing the road, he was crushed by a rock and broke four of his ribs," Master said emotionlessly.

"'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix!'" Lan Yu's straightened as he spoke, his torpor swept away.

Everyone was in formation. A wide wooden chair was placed in the mourning hall. A group of filial mourners bowed their heads and knelt before me. All other visitors stood in the courtyard, stretching their necks towards the mourning hall to get a closer look. Even the frolicking yellow dog sat down in the courtyard in an orderly fashion.

I suddenly felt a sense of holiness come over me, like a warrior on a special mission. That kind of perspective could make a person fanatical. In everyday comings and goings, in bland everyday life, one could not encounter such a feeling. It was so pure and unspoiled,

like the new air on the remote parts of a mountain after the spring rain had passed, or like the flying mist that surrounded the snowy mountain summit in winter.

Master walked out and bowed three times to the mourning hall, then turned around and addressed the crowd:

"'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix', the loftiest of all of the talents of our ancestors, could only be passed to the chief. Such a solemn song was reserved for the person of highest virtue." I knew that this was the traditional prologue to "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." The people before us could not understand such language, and so, remained silent. Master added, "I needn't say much about Secretary Dou. The things he did for the people of Fire Village are all before our eyes and in our hearts. If there is anyone in Second-to-None who still deserves 'One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix' Secretary Dou is certainly one of them. So today, sending off Old Secretary Dou is the Yo Family Troupe's leader, Yo Tianming." Master's sincerity made all of the people kneeling before me start to make low whimpering sounds.

"In great and holy sorrow, we respectfully send off the deceased. Begin to play!" Master bellowed.

I stuck the suona in my mouth, and suddenly, everything before my eyes turned to black.

Until this very day, I have lived under the shame of that moment. I could have easily completed the mission, carrying out that which a countryside musician should be able to do. I could have made future generations speak of that moment, could have made them mention my name. I could have performed the most moving curtain call in the history of the musician's craft, even could have used this sacred moment to finish my

career as a suona master. But within an instant, these possibilities vanished completely. My behavior caused one of Second-to-None's ancient professions to come to a strange and ugly end. Even though the art of the suona faced the possibility of being forgotten in the changing times, in its last moment, I could not even maintain the dignity that it had always had. So now, when recording this momentary experience, I experience a terrible kind of suffering. It is as if the scar in the deep part of my soul that had slowly healed has been torn open again. I can see the fresh blood dripping down, then feel a penetrating pain.

I opened my eyes again, seeing pair after pair of eyes watching me in desperate anticipation. I slowly removed the suona from my mouth, stood, and faced my master, saying:

"I'm sorry everyone. I've forgotten the tune!"

Much to everyone's surprise, Master laughed. All of the spectators giggled. The spectators were still laughing when Master started to cry. He squatted on the ground and wailed loudly, in agony. My Big Brother Classmate, Lan Yu, and I stood near him. Nobody spoke. After crying a while, Master stood and faced the kneeling mourners. He bowed three times and said, "We apologize for failing Old Secretary Dou, and we apologize for failing each of you."

"Old Master Jiao, why don't you play it?" one of the members of the crowd suggested.

Master waved his hands and said, "I haven't been qualified to do that for a long time. This troupe is not the Jiao Family Troupe. Only the Yo Family Troupe is eligible to play that song." When he had finished, he turned around and snatched the suona from my

hand, stretched out his knee, and violently snapped the instrument over it with both hands.

Ka-cha!

Master left, quickly disappearing into the thick darkness of the Fire Village night.

Lan Yu picked up the two pieces of suona from the ground. He looked at me and said, “So it appears that I won’t be hearing “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix” in this lifetime!”

19

Father’s attitude toward me grew worse and worse. He never gave me a gentle look. When the water jar was empty, he would criticize my carelessness, saying, “You don’t even notice when there’s no water in the jar.” When I filled the jar, he would curse me again, saying, “What can you do besides fill a water jar?”

Father was right to curse at me. I was a twenty-six or twenty-seven-year-old at the time, and was still holed up at home. I observed the other people from Water Village who were around my age; some had taken wives, others had had children, and most of them had already moved around a bit, traveled by car to the county seat or the provincial capital. Other than catching a glimpse of them at New Year’s, one could rarely hope to see young people in the village.

Since the time when the Yo Family Troupe had disbanded, I had not touched the suona.

The Yo Family Troupe’s disbandment had not been planned. It happened naturally, as if the group had evaporating into the air. Nobody invited us, so nobody

played. I once ran into Big Brother Classmate at the market in Second-to-None. We greeted each other, discussed the growth of the year's crops, and went to a restaurant for some wine. But nobody mentioned anything about the Yo Family Troupe. Not even the tiniest bit. It was as if the troupe had never even existed.

When I turned twenty-eight, winter came to Water Village again. During that time, winters had started to become milder and milder, such that there was not even a decent snowfall. The winters of the two years prior were even more pathetic, lacking in even the smallest decorative touch of frost. Those winters were all loose and sloppy. I can only think of one instance in which some sleet fell. It not only pounded painfully on people's hands and faces, but also turned every corner of Water Village to sludge.

I most feared showing my face before Father. It wasn't simply that he would curse me. It was that watching him grow older by the day made me feel guilty. Other people's children would send their parents various amounts of money each year, but I only sat at home eating and drinking. Mother didn't blame or curse me the way Father did, but she was always heaving sigh after sigh. Her sighs were like a sponge that could never be wrung dry. They were even harder to bear than Father's insults. So, I had to avoid them both within the narrow space of the family home. After eating dinner each night, Father would go to town to watch others play cards. He never played, only watched. Truthfully, he really wanted to sit down and shuffle the cards around a bit, but his empty pockets wouldn't allow it. Mother, on the other hand, would sit beneath the lamplight and keep herself busy. She would work until she was dead tired, and then go to sleep.

Each night, I would climb into bed early, but I would stay awake all of the way until the sky grew bright.

That year, from the time when the rice husks turned green, there was not a single rainfall. At the beginning, dark rainclouds gathered and both sky and earth darkened like a prelude, and all of the villagers stood in the fields waiting for the rain to blow in. In the end, a few drops splashed down with a *pitter patter,* leaving behind a few damp little puddles. Then instantly, the clouds parted and the mist dispersed. This was repeated a few times before the villagers' hope and patience withered away like the rice stalks.

Father's back was becoming increasingly hunched, like a loose bow. Every day, Father remained beside his paddy, his face as sallow as the dry grains. His gaze darted helplessly about the flat plot filled with wasted rice stalks, moving with the wind, swaying back and forth, weak and powerless. He would do this all of the way until sunset, at which time he would finally straighten himself, and with the squeaking sound of bones rubbing together, move his shriveled body back home.

Occasionally I would run across him in the courtyard. He would stare at me blankly without anger or ridicule, his gaze as gentle as a spider's web, binding me until I could not breathe.

I clearly remember, during that season, all of the crops eventually died of thirst in the fields. I stood on the mountain behind Water Village, where everything I saw was a dry yellow bright enough to scorch a person. That yellow stretched all of the way to the horizon. Such a color made me quite depressed. But Yo Bencheng of Water Village made me even more depressed. His face was unbelievably yellowed. When his liver cancer

entered its late stage, Mother and I begged to sell the old cow in the pen to pay for his treatment, but Yo Bencheng said, “Forget it. I’m just a drying husk in the field. Not even a monsoon can revive me.”

In a month, Father’s body was stretched out in bed, shrinking by the day. After returning from the doctor, Father never left that wide wooden bed in his house. The wooden bed was left to him by my grandfather. He had been born in it, and he was preparing to die in it, as if completing a laughable cycle.

In the morning, I led my family’s cow down to the Water Village’s riverside to eat some grass. When I was heading home at noon, I was startled to see Father standing at the head of the fields, the sunshine kneading him into a small ball. He was leaning his body against a ridge covered in thick grass, such that he looked like a yellow mushroom growing out from amongst the grass blades. I saw him from afar, and once my surprise had passed, I shed tears.

I feared that he would see my tears, so I wiped then dry before I approached him. He wobbled over to me, like a child who had just learned to walk. Patting the old cow’s neck, Father said, “Sell her!” Once he had uttered this, two tears suddenly rolled down his face. I understood. Father was still afraid of dying. After all, he was only in his early fifties. At that age, most people in Water Village were still shuttling back and forth through the fields with some leftover strength, with the end of the road still far out of sight!

“We should have sold her long ago. It would have been better to sell her early and cure your illness early,” I said.

On the day when I sold the cow, I bought a pair of soft-sole cloth shoes for father in Second-to-None. I had thought this over. If Father had to go to the city to cure his illness, he would surely have to walk here and there. Cloth shoes would not pinch his feet, and since there was nothing left of his body but bones, anything that was soft seemed like the right choice.

In the evening, when I returned and placed the shoes in Father's hands, he suddenly twisted up from the bed and boxed my ear.

"Who told you to waste this money? This little bastard is a spendthrift!" he said. The slap on my ear did not resonate at all. The only sound I heard was the cracking of bones.

I remained silent, and simply helped Father lay back down. His nostrils and mouth sucked in one big breath of foul air after another. After breathing for a while, Father finally calmed down. He exhaled slowly and painfully rotated his sluggish body to look at me. He said, "Tianming, I've heard that someone's started playing suona in Metal Village." I nodded.

Actually, it was not only Metal Village. Besides Water Village, all of the villages in Second-to-None now had suona players. I don't know when it started, but the bands from the city disappeared. They were like a fog stopped on the riverbank; as soon as the wind passed through, they were gone without a trace. Once the bands vanished, the sound of the suona rose again, loud and clear.

"Pull the Yo Family Troupe back together," Father said. "Second-to-None cannot be without a suona troupe."

"They already exist! With the exception of Water Village, all of the villages have them," I stated.

"Fucking mother… is that what you call suona?!" Father's face went ashen, the sound of his breathing grew louder, and sweat formed on his forehead.

I sat frozen on the side of the bed, completely silent. Father's throat was making gurgling noises like the river's undertow, tossing secrets unknown to man in its turbulence. After a while, I heard Father make the whimpering sound of crying, sharp and thin, piercing as a sharp knife passing through the stagnant air in the room. Then, like a tearing cloth, the sound abruptly grew incredibly shrill.

At this moment I discovered that in his heart, my father, Yo Bencheng of Water Village, had wanted his son to play suona all along. After the disbandment of the Yo Family Troupe, my father's poisonous looks, attacks, and sneers were actually a result of the fact that he was stricken with sadness. It was as if, in the end, the jar that held his ideals had been smashed. I once again thought back to that wet day when Father took me to visit Master, thought of the bloody cut on his head that appeared after he fell and clambered up from the ground.

I extended a hand and touched Father's jutting collarbone. In defiance, it pressed painfully into my hand, and even more painfully into my heart.

"I'll try," I said quietly. Father still heard me.

Suddenly the light in the room grew very dim, but I could still see the glow in Father's eyes. My words were like a burning match, lighting the last drops of oil in Father's dry lamp.

"I knew it, you bastard, you still miss the suona," a smile split across Father's withered, narrow face, mixing with the suffering and desolation there. "Do you know why I sold the cow?" Father said as innocently as a child, "To buy supplies for the Yo Family Troupe. I've thought it over. The drums, gongs, they're all old. You should exchange for new ones." He coughed. Father was too excited. Again, he breathed deeply for a while before calming down. He then said, "When I die, a four-piece will be just fine."

"I'll play "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix," I said.

Father waved his shrunken, skinny hands, and after a long pause, he said, "I don't deserve it, I'm not worthy!"

20

Father's illness became progressively worse and he spoke less and less. At first he could not sleep at night, and later he would sleep right through and have difficulty waking. Mother remained vigilant. If she had to be away from his side for a little while, she would go in periodically to check on him, wipe his nose, and rub his forehead, afraid that he would go to sleep and never wake up again.

I, on the other hand, was running between the villages of Second-to-None day and night.

In all of my many years living in Second-to-None, I had never heard so many frogs croaking in the fields and bird calling in the valleys at the same time. As I walked by myself on the narrow mountain paths at night, the cold crescent moon on the side of the sky shone indifferently, and the land was as icy as the palm of a corpse. I pulled my clothes around me and discovered that the cold had finally arrived unrestrained. Within

my mind floated the image of Father's lonely and helpless gaze and his deteriorating visage. I was afraid he could not wait until I re-formed the Yo Family Troupe and would no longer be able to hear the sound of the suona. According to Yo Bencheng of Water Village, a funeral without suona music was unimaginable.

Second-to-None was endlessly measured by my footsteps. I was like a fisherman who had gone to sea for a long time but returned empty-handed. At the moment, my classmates were in some bustling, far-off city, working and dripping sweat. It was as if they had come to an agreement and, in an orderly fashion, left the land where they were born and raised.

Big Brother Classmate was still around. His not going to the city was not because he did not want to go. He had been in an accident and had a lame leg; that leg became the obstacle between him and the distant metropolis. When I gave him a cigarette, he stuck it in his mouth and headed towards the fields as he described the time when Lan Yu came to visit him the year before. "That little ass, each cigarette he smoked was as expensive as your entire box. You better believe it, those cigarettes were fucking smooth. It seems that it's really fucking easy to make money in the city."

After hearing my reason for visiting him, Big Brother Classmate looked at me in disbelief and said, "Have you ever seen a two-person suona performance? In the old days, ordinary poor folks would have a four-piece, and you want to create a two-piece? That's like a burial for a dog."

I said, "It's not a burial for a dog, it's a burial for my father."

An apologetic look came over Big Brother Classmate's face. He took a long drag of his cigarette and said, "Go to Fire Village. A lot of troupes have cropped up there,

and I've heard that they're big, even sixteen-piece. Fuck, sixteen people playing suona at once, I'm afraid that could bring the dead back to life!"

I walked into the distance. Big Brother Classmate stood on the ridge and shouted, "Go have a look! In Second-to-None, suona music has become Fire Village's territory."

I went to Fire Village in search of a suona troupe for hire.

And it was truly shocking.

Sixteen suona masters occupied the entirety of the courtyard. Even the deceased, this necessary component of the funeral, was squeezed into a narrow space, out of the way. A long row of rectangular tables took on an arrogant stance. The tea plates on top of the tables were filled with cigarettes and sunflower seeds. The bottled wine for wetting the musicians' throats also stood in formation. The suona masters were dressed in matching dark red Western style suits and ascots that were smoothed and rolled into circles around their necks, each looking like a groom strolling into the bridal chamber. At the head of the table was a man wearing a silver suit and a bright red tie. A shining medal hung from his chest. From the looks of him, he must have been the troupe leader.
But the most obvious thing was not this troupe leader, but the stacks of hundred yuan bills sitting next to him in a dish, producing a dazzling sight.

"Rise!" the band leader shouted. This was followed by an enormous uproar. There were too many suona horns. The musicians had a hard time keeping the tune together, like a flock of noisy birds rising out of the forest. They tooted out a few lines with great fanfare, completely surprising their listeners. Inadvertently, I noticed that there were two young suona players whose cheeks were completely deflated; everyone should

know that that this was the appearance of someone who was not actually making any sound. This was the largest suona troupe I had ever seen, and it was also the worst-sounding. My Big Brother Classmate was wrong. A sixteen-piece could not blow the dead back to life, but could possibly blow a living person to death.

When I returned home, I found that Father could no longer speak. I approached his ear and said, "I've invited an eight-piece from Fire Village for you!" Father's eyes suddenly shot open, his head swaying wildly, his throat gurgling. I knew that he didn't want Fire Village's suona players. As he had said before, the suona in Fire Village was not real suona.

Yo Bencheng of Water Village left this world when the river bend started to freeze. He just departed quietly. The night before, he ate half a bowl of rice gruel. The next morning, we discovered that his body was already as cold as ice. When he passed away, he was as thin as a newborn child, making his bed appear immeasurably large. I used the money from selling the cow to prepare Father's funeral. His funeral was as deserted and lifeless as the season in which it was held, and naturally, there was no suona troupe. The only sound to be heard was that of the wind howling past.

At dusk, I remained by Father's grave. From this time on, Water Village no longer had a Yo Bencheng. He was like the leaves in deep autumn, fearfully drifting down and rotting on the ground. As the sun set, I thought for a long time, but could not think of anything I had ever done for my father. The only thing I had ever given him was disappointment after disappointment. I no longer played suona, and the Yo Family Troupe was gone. When he died, he did not even have a single suona to see him off at his funeral.

It had been a long time since I had witnessed such a sunset in Water Village. It had long been my impression that Water Village sunsets passed in an instant; as soon as you noticed them, they would drop headlong into the darkness of night. But if watched more carefully, Water Village sunsets became quite beautiful. The descending sun would hover on the top of the mountains with the grass brushing against its face, tickling it lightly; breezes rolled down from the mountain ridge, blowing open the mountain's shirt to reveal its naked, rust-colored back. The earth, in all of its simple combinations, appeared ancient and warm.

I pulled out the suona from against my breast and faced the sun, filling the brass bell with the sunset.

The tune swelled up viscidly, spinning around and alighting on the fresh grave, following the grooves in the dirt, penetrating the frozen yellow earth. I knew that my father could hear his son's suona. From the time when I had started studying to the time when he left this world, he had never heard me play "One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix." At the beginning, the suona resounded brightly, but its sound slowly faded lower as tears mixed dampness and sorrow into my song. While deep in the music, I saw my father stand before me with a gaze as warm as the sunlight. Long-lost days gradually came into view within my clouded vision.

The wind kicked up and scattered the sound of the suona, shaking off the solemn tone and replacing it with even greater desolation. My throat was seized with a painful sadness. The suona finally began to cry. It started out with a whimper, which then grew into immense grief. The boundless mountain range was moved by the heart-rending melancholy of the suona horn.

21

That year, once the first snow had passed, the village chief led some people to my home. He stood in the courtyard patting my shoulder and said, “This is Second-to-None’s Yo Family Troupe leader.”

“He’s so young!” exclaimed a bespectacled middle-aged man.

“It’s like this,” he explained, “We’ve been sent by the province to dig out and collect folk culture.”

I asked, “So why did you come to find me?”

The man with glasses said, “We want to hear your troupe play some authentic suona music.”

I replied, “The Yo Family Troupe is no more. There are some troupes in Fire Village. Go have a look.”

The man laughed and said, “We’ve just come from there. I’m not sure what to say about it!” He coughed. “We listened to their troupes, and in all seriousness, that cannot be considered pure suona.”

“You see?” he handed me a cigarette.

I said, “I’m afraid I can’t. My classmates have all gone to the city.”

At that time, a slightly younger man stepped out of the group. The village chief hurried to introduce him as the Provincial Minister of Propaganda. The young minister waved heroically. He said, “Go call them back. We’ll cover your costs.” Somehow, his tone and posture warmed my blood. To see the Yo Family Troupe playing together again would be a truly amazing experience! Seven or eight people would line up in formation, playing melodiously. This kind of scene often appeared in my imagination.

I said, “Okay.”

Winter quickly passed, and I received a letter from Lan Yu. He wrote that he was already established in the city, that he now owned a box factory.

When I pushed opened the steel door, I saw an elderly guard sitting in a dim entrance room, reading a newspaper.

“May I ask, is Lan Yu here?”

“Factory Manager Lan has gone out,” the old man replied, “Why are you looking for him?” he raised his head as he asked.

“Master!”

That evening, Lan Yu called all of the classmates who were in the city to a gathering and treated everyone to dinner at a lavish restaurant. Master had not changed at all. He didn’t say a word at the dinner table and ate in complete silence. When I explained the purpose of my visit, I saw a light flash in his eyes. He wiped his mouth and said, “The higher-ups see value in the suona; this is a good thing!”

“It’s been so many years since I’ve picked up that thing,” Second Brother Classmate sighed with emotion.

I pulled a suona from my pack and handed it to Second Brother Classmate, saying, “Give it a try?” He took the suona, held it level, and when he had just placed the reed in his mouth, his expression suddenly grew dark. He raised his right hand, and I saw that my Second Brother Classmate, who worked odd jobs at a lumberyard, was missing his middle finger.

“It got swallowed up in the sawmill,” he said. “I won’t be playing suona again in this lifetime.”

Fourth Brother Classmate, who unloaded cargo at a cement factory for a living, said, “I’ll try.” He had not forgotten his form. He arranged his posture just like before, but once in his mouth, the suona did not make the resplendent sound that we had all imagined and anticipated. It just made a wet sound and came to a painful halt. My classmate pulled the suona out of his mouth and spat out a mouthful of phlegm. I could see that the glob of spittle on the floor was the color of cement.

“Don’t go back, stay here!” Lan Yu looked at me and said.

I drank a big mouthful of wine and said, “I have to go back. I definitely have to go back.” Looking at all of my classmates at the table, I could not hold back my tears. Master also cried.

I knew that the suona had already completely left me. It had once been such a sublime and poetic part of my life. But now, it was as if the blood pouring from the wound it had left had finished flowing, had run dry.

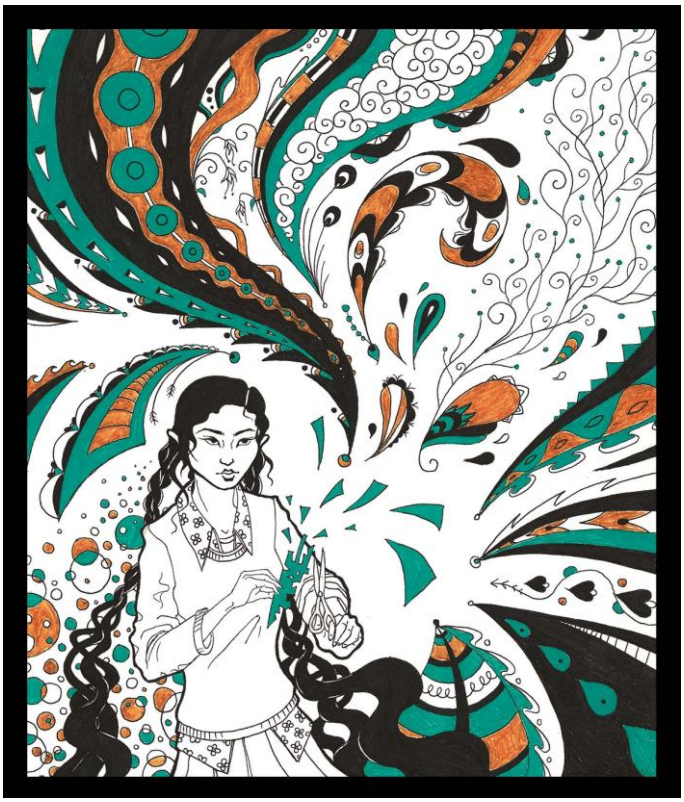
At night, Master and my classmates took me to the railway station. As we followed the frigid city road, nobody spoke. Only an occasional car would go by, blaring its startling horn. Or a pedestrian would sometimes pass us, lowering his head and looking straight ahead, hurriedly charging into the blurred confusion of the city’s large streets and small alleys.

Outside of the railway station, under an enormous billboard, an old beggar in a tattered shirt raised a suona to his lips and played with a *wuwu*. Amongst the twinkling evening lights, the sound of the suona was lofty and desolate.

The tune was a genuine “One Hundred Birds Saluting the Phoenix.”

Paper Dreams

By Lu Min



1

When it was discovered that she could not speak, her father walked a long way in search of the temple that everyone had been mentioning. Besides being extremely thin, there was actually nothing strange about the temple abbot. He simply asked for the girl's infant name and time of birth. He then closed his eyes and sat for four hours before uttering a few words: "for her adult name, call her Kaiyin, 'voice in bloom.'"

Everyone had strong confidence in this. All of the people in the town of Tumba shouted together, thinking that they need only chant and call out her name with conviction. Perhaps they need only grasp the little girl's hand and drag her about, teaching her to recite her name over and over: Kaiyin. Kaiyin. Though these kinds of simple actions and short-lived good intentions could not be considered fruitful, they at least expressed a certain accumulation of devotion to the girl's cause.

But Kaiyin still did not have a "voice in bloom." It seemed that everyone developed a guilty conscience because of this. For no apparent reason, they felt that they owed Kaiyin something. Consider for a moment: Kaiyin lost her mother just after birth, and now she could not speak. Doesn't this mean she deserves recompense?

Those outside of the girl's family only thought of it as a small debt. But as for Kaiyin's father, his heart hurt so much that he nearly considered digging a hole and jumping inside. He was certain that he must have killed someone in the past life, or at least committed some other sort of sin. But he was still not willing to admit defeat. Kaiyin turned five, eight, ten years old; he still secretly kept a keen eye on his daughter's throat, every day looking for a miracle to appear before him. When he burned paper money for his deceased wife every Ghost Festival, Winter Solstice, and New Year's Eve,

he would pray against fate, begging her to bless their daughter, let her throat open for just an instant, even just to make the *tu!* sound of spitting out nut shells.

But there was no sound. Just silence.

It was best to admit it: the girl was simply a mute.

Fortunately, her ears were good. Even especially good. She could understand anything that was said. What's more, her eyes were good, good enough that she could automatically recognize anyone in just a glance. Whoever was caught in that glance would suddenly feel a bit forlorn, for he would not know how to express affection for this charming yet pitiful child.

The old aunties would say, "If you ask me, the problem is her name. This name, 'open sound,' it's just too eager, forceful, driving… and what has it accomplished? It's just like when folks name their children 'healthy and strong,' 'leader of the country,' 'cultured and martial,' it's just so utilitarian, so ridiculously impatient. It's not right. So you need to remember: no matter what it is that you want, whether you ask for it from heaven, ask for it from the earth, ask for it from other people, you can never go straight to the point. You have to understand how to hide or circumvent your desires, because nothing good comes easily in this world."

…

Every day, Teacher Yi would spend half an hour writing calligraphy. He especially liked to copy "The Multi-Pagoda Stele." While writing, he would lecture his two sons on morality. He discussed all matters of comings and goings, how scholarly honors are won and lost, how lives begin and end. At any rate, he would talk about

whatever came to his mind, regardless whether his sons understood or not. After all, he was a literature teacher, inherently verbose.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes." The boys replied in unison. It was during these instances that the two boys worked together best, for this way they could slip away from their studies a bit early and go play with Kaiyin.

The older Yi boy was named Dayuan, and the younger was named Xiaoyuan. These two names were very appropriate. Teacher Yi pursed his lips, turned over an old newspaper, and continued to write characters down the page, suppressing a feeling of self-satisfaction. After all, people cannot hold too much pride in their hearts; pride in one's heart is much worse, much more prone to cause harm than even a proud appearance.

…

At ten years old, Kaiyin became classmates with Dayuan and Xiaoyuan. They saw each other at school daily.

Kaiyin's school enrollment was a result of Teacher Yi's repeated efforts. He often argued, "She's not deaf, she can just go and listen. After all, she'll learn to recognize a few characters and understand some logic; she'll be much better off than someone who is illiterate."

Kaiyin's father could not bear to listen to others talk about deafness and blindness, or any other type of disability. To him, it always felt like an attack by innuendo, and forced him to think about Kaiyin's muteness. "Ok, she'll go. She'll go."

He'd casually agree, but would always delay for fear that Kaiyin would be bullied at school.

In this way, he postponed Kaiyin's enrollment until she was ten years old, at which time she finally started first grade. Her father actually felt some sense of relief. With her greater age and size, she should not be at a disadvantage.

Certainly, nobody pushed her and nobody shoved her. In reality, Kaiyin's only disadvantage was that she could not be understood since she could not speak out. After school, those small children from her classroom, neighboring classrooms, and the classrooms neighboring the neighboring classrooms, all surrounded her in layers, like the petals of a flower, asking her various questions with utmost curiosity.

"Kaiyin, are you missing part of your tongue?" "Are you still mute when you laugh? Laugh and let us see!" "Do you burp?" "Do you sneeze?" "Kaiyin, do you know sign language—how do you make the word 'shit'? What about 'piss'?" They all inquired at once, then eagerly stared at Kaiyin, awaiting a response. Of course, with the exception of one pair of anxious eyes, none could bear to wait for an answer. So, the children just touched her hands, rubbed her hair, and went through her pencils and books as if the answers were hidden somewhere within.

This scene had played out for Dayuan to see. Already a fifth grader, Dayuan was large, but also very timid. He called for his brother at once, for when the two brothers walked together, their confidence would swell. Besides, their father was Teacher Yi. "What are you doing? Don't you know anything about the rules of Socialist civil conduct: the Five Stresses, Four Points of Beauty, and Three Forms of Love? Is this how you work to develop your character, intellect, health, and artistry? Is this how you join

with your classmates to show respect for these principles?" Fourth grader Xiaoyuan had inherited Teacher Yi's eloquence. He could give an impressive speech, and the look in his eye complemented his harsh words as his glare swept the circle of children.
The children in the lower grades quickly became ashamed when reflecting upon what they had done. But, from this they now knew: Kaiyin was under the protection of Teacher Yi, Dayuan, and Xiaoyuan. It would not be a good idea to try to get close to her. Anyway, their form of getting close was just for the sake of teasing with her, making her cry, causing her to make a fool of herself. The feelings and actions of children are always at odds with each other.

Like the pistil of the flower of children, Kaiyin appeared from within the drifting petals. She tidied her hair and looked at Dayuan and Xiaoyuan, her two thumbs quietly circling each other to say: thank you. But the two brothers did not see her hands. They stared into her eyes, leapt into them, as if the bottoms of their feet had lost all sense of the ground, of depth. The two ten-something boys did not know how to handle these kinds of eyes.

…

Perhaps they had spent too much time with Kaiyin. Kaiyin's father particularly liked when guests would come to the house to play. During those times, the house would finally have a bit of sound, conversation, and warmth.

"Oh, Dayuan, welcome. Oh, Xiaoyuan, welcome." Every time, Kaiyin's father would ceremoniously greet each boy individually, as if he wanted to use the opportunity to talk to its fullest. "Come, come in and have a seat. Kaiyin's inside making paper-cuts."

Dayuan and Xiaoyuan, one tall and one short, would walk in. Kaiyin, who was sitting under the north-facing window, would turn and smile towards the two brothers, then once again drop her head and cut paper. Her hair shone brightly, lit by the patch of skylight from the sky in the northern window.

Dayuan and Xiaoyuan would come by daily just to see Kaiyin's paper-cuts. Kaiyin was a different person while making paper-cuts. She became unusually unfazed by her onlookers' gazes, giving visitors the opportunity to stare boldly. As long as her hands held a piece of paper and scissors, it was as if those hands could imperceptibly build a house for her and hand her a key. She would enter that house in a flash, hiding in the solitude of the paper-cut. The outside world could be in a state of chaos, thrown into complete confusion, but this all ceased to have any effect on her.

It must be mentioned that no one had ever deliberately taught Kaiyin how to make paper-cuts.

The town of Tumba had a tradition of paper-cutting. The old aunties could all create some simple designs, but were hardly enthusiastic about the activity; they merely joined in during the slack season between harvesting and sowing. At that time, Kaiyin would just mix in with them, silently leaning against a doorframe and staring blankly, her gaze shifting from one family to another, one hand to another, one pair of scissors to another, occasionally drawing near to observe more carefully. Yet, if someone asked her a question, she would become shy and immediately run off.

However, it seemed that in these mere moments, Kaiyin's knack for paper-cutting was awakened. The clumsy, heavy scissors seemed totally unpromising at first sight, but

as soon as they entered Kaiyin's hand, they obeyed their mistress, becoming whatever she desired, molding images into exactly what she intended them to be.

In order to practice, Kaiyin greedily hoarded scraps of paper. Though they were usually little more than candy wrappers and cigarette boxes, she would put them aside carefully, as if she had procured some sort of treasure. To an ordinary villager, sheets of paper are always in short supply.

It appeared that Kaiyin was totally obsessed with her craft, and as such, she brought her preoccupation to school with her. As she sat rigidly in the classroom, her scissors would start to wriggle around inside her desk. After just two weeks, her math book, writing log, and art pad would all completely fall to tatters at the slightest touch. But this was nothing; in the matter of a few more days, the books and notepads of her deskmate and the student in front of her had become similarly ragged.

It was no exaggeration to say that this issue had become rather serious. Teacher Yi had to pay a visit to Kaiyin's father, with his two sons in tow.

Strangely, Kaiyin's father was not ashamed at all, and even seemed a bit excited. After all, three people had just appeared in an instant to talk to him. He listened to Teacher Yi with interest, sometimes butting in to solicit more details. After listening to the end, he suddenly grinned and started to laugh heartily—he imagined the teacher picking up a normal-looking book, only to suddenly find sheet after sheet of paper-cuts falling out. Wasn't this situation rather amusing?

Dayuan and Xiaoyuan also laughed, and in the end, even Teacher Yi couldn't refrain from laughing. They never would have guessed that silent Kaiyin would become obstinate for the sake of this little hobby. In fact, she was quite daring.

"*Aiya*, it's only a way to while away the time. Otherwise, just let her play a game or play with a classmate." Kaiyin's father slowly stopped laughing, stared at Teacher Yi, and thought for a moment: "Actually this isn't right, she shouldn't go to school anymore. She's made it to third grade, and for her, that's enough."

It seemed as if this were an inevitable conclusion. For whatever reason, Teacher Yi looked sternly at his own two sons, as if he had just thought of some life principle at that moment. His thoughts and emotions surged, but were too difficult to express.

At this time, Kaiyin casually walked out of her room. She had just made a paper-cut. Because she had no paper, she had used a corn husk. The yellow, translucent husk had been cut into a snoozing yellow cat, its eyes bleary, squinting in the darkness at a butterfly, its manner charmingly naive.

Kaiyin lifted up the picture of the cat and butterfly and smiled at the people around her. Looking into Kaiyin's eyes, Teacher Yi suddenly understood: of course, this girl can't speak, but she doesn't need to speak at all—for anyone with those kinds of eyes, speech is just a redundancy.

…

Kaiyin was never seen again at school. Dayuan and Xiaoyuan found this hard enough to bear, but after school, they also inevitably had to listen to Teacher Yi lecture about essays on morality.

They watched Teacher Yi's brush pen slowly move across an old piece of newspaper, leaking black, black ink, skimming and gripping, pushing and pausing. Teacher Yi would write a character, then speak a phrase. *Aiya*, as the boys listened, their tense backs covered in layers of sweat and their hands rolled into fists. When they heard

the sound of their father's voice drop into a drowsy register, the two children shouted together: "We're going to watch Kaiyin make paper-cuts!" Clenching down on his brush, Teacher Yi was startled. When he raised his head, not a trace of his sons remained.

Kaiyin was still sitting under the north-facing window, her hair bright and her eyes deep.

Kaiyin's father had gotten her a hardened old account book from some unknown source. The book had thin pages with red and green lines, and the thickness of the paper was suitable. Kaiyin cut each page into all sorts of little designs.

As soon as Dayuan sat down, he silently picked up that account book. When he had finished viewing the design on the open page, he flipped back to the beginning to through the ledger to look again.

As for Xiaoyuan, he just approached Kaiyin and started speaking to her. Xiaoyuan's speech flowed freely, as if expressing all of the things Kaiyin could not say on her behalf. As Kaiyin listened, she would squint her eyes and smile, but her hands would not stop for even a moment. The scissors cut in on the top and poked out on the bottom as a piece of thin account paper slowly became a school of goldfish with their tails spread out, the bubbles they spouted forming together into a symmetrical eight-character design.

Xiaoyuan received the finished goldfish image, looked closely for a moment, then carefully handed it to Dayuan, who was sitting dumbfounded. Dayuan received it and also studied it carefully, then meticulously placed it back between the pages of the account book.

These few motions would be acted out and repeated each day. It was always in the afternoon, at four or five o'clock, as the sky was growing dim and dusk had just begun, when the air had become thick, almost sweet.

If a lens were following in this blue fog twilight, like a curious and well-intentioned eye, it would notice that in this unchanging baton pass motion, day by day, the three children grew up. Dayuan became strong. Xiaoyuan gained the air of a scholar. Kaiyin grew beautiful, and her paper-cuts, much like her person, became more and more comely, more affecting.

2

Two or three years passed, and the scissors had rubbed two light yellow calluses into Kaiyin's right hand. Kaiyin's paper-cutting reputation became like a small bird, stopping on the branch outside one house, calling above the eaves of another house, blithely flapping its wings and flitting about the village.

The people of Tumba love a spectacle, be it a holiday celebration, a birthday, or a wedding. At such events, there would always be enough fish and meat that a man could eat until his stomach grew round. There would also be gongs and drums, filling the ears with their clamor. And even the eyes are not treated shabbily, for the eaves, lintels, pillars, window panes, mirror corners, lamp shades, and really any place onto which a decoration could be stuck or spread would be colorfully embellished.

But decorative paper-cuts require leisure time and a patient temperament, nimble skill and a bit of passion. Most other people were found wanting in one or two of these areas, but Kaiyin did not lack any of the required traits; she may even have had a few extra.

Spring arrived, and she cut an image of two men plowing the fields, cut white silk worms on mulberry leaves spinning silk. Summer came, and she cut out watermelons bursting with red flesh and black seeds, cut out a dog panting next to a well. Then, in the fall season, it was haystacks piled as high as a tall man, crowds of sunflowers drooping their weighty heads… All in all, she needed only to see or hear of something. No matter what it was, if she took a liking to it, if her eyes had perhaps viewed it a few times, she would return home and sit under the north-facing window. She would pick up a piece of paper, and holding her scissors there horizontally, forming a small angle, paused for a moment. She would then start cutting, and that thing that had caught her fancy would emerge.

After she had finished cutting, she would casually stick her work in one place or another so that when people would happen to come by to ask for a paper-cut, she could just pull one out with one hand, completely unstinted. Unlike other folks, who would handle her work lightly with both palms held out in front of them as if holding some kind of fantastic treasure, she treated the paper-cuts casually. She actually seemed to have grown weary of the images, as if her eyes had long ago ceased to see the splendor before them.

In this way, the paper-cuts Kaiyin made, or rather, the images she produced, were scattered throughout homes in all directions, pasted onto cattle fences, stuck on hearths. Everywhere was bright, brilliant red. No matter where one walked, the images could be seen with every nod, drop, and turn of the head. The men, women, elders, and children of Tumba found it difficult to avoid thinking about Kaiyin.

Even though Kaiyin could not speak and did not much care for smiling, this did nothing to obstruct the fact that she was a town favorite—cleverness, skill, gentility, and depth like hers didn't exist much anymore.

But the fondness that people felt for her was really only experienced privately, as there was no possibility of interaction or discussion. After all, given standards of personal propriety and limited styles of emoting, there was no way of getting close. They could only mind their own business and care for themselves.

This was also true of Dayuan and Xiaoyuan.

Together, these two children ate, slept, and watched Teacher Yi write characters while he lectured or morality in the same exact way. But as it happened, they grew up to be completely different.

Dayuan's body may have been large and strong, but he was also extremely unrefined. This ruined his prospects for ever speaking a complete sentence or earning a good grade on a test. He forced himself to study up until he reached the third year of middle school, at which time he simply graduated and went home. Teacher Yi fell sick with anger, but when he observed Xiaoyuan, he spontaneously recovered from his malaise.

Now, Xiaoyuan was truly Dayuan's antithesis. Dayuan wrote characters as if pounding steel, always exhausted and soaking with sweat. Xiaoyuan wrote as if he were yawning, using not even the slightest bit of energy. If told to earn the second-best grade, he couldn't do it; even when he started attending a county-level school, he could earn nothing but the highest grade. In addition, his words and his voice were ever so elegant and smooth! Whether he was giving school-wide lectures, serving as the leader for a

singing competition, or hosting a New Year's party, it was clear that there was no show that Xiaoyuan couldn't steal.

All in all, whatever fragments of information were passed along from the county seat would always fill the people of Tumba with a sense of genuine admiration. They would say, "This Xiaoyuan, he has a limitless future, and he will do big things." And along with this, they'd often quietly add a sentence: "*Ai*, never would have thought, from the same family, that Dayuan! Tsk tsk tsk."

People would murmur in appreciation half the day, nodding their heads at each other, making forceful expressions, vaguely savoring certain ironies in human fate. Then, they would suddenly find themselves unable to even utter a presentable sigh.

So one can imagine, with Dayuan and Xiaoyuan being as they were, the two boys' feelings of fondness for Kaiyin were equally strong but completely dissimilar.

…

Let's first consider Dayuan. Dayuan, to use Tumba residents' coarse analogy, was so mild and awkward that one couldn't even beat a muffled fart out of him. But what is the use of a muffled fart anyway?

Dayuan had a wooden flute. In the beginning, Teacher Yi was not happy about his son's interest in the flute, since he thought it gave the youth the air of a troubadour. But one day he came across a sentence that read, "Silk is less than bamboo, bamboo is less than flesh," meaning that, from the perspective of its character, string music could not be compared to flute music, while flute music is not as good as the human voice. Teacher Yi pondered this, and concluded that since the flute is made of bamboo, it counts as

middling quality. This harmonized with Teacher Yi's esteemed Doctrine of the Golden Mean, so he felt he must give in to Dayuan on this point.

And when Dayuan earned approval, he played to his heart's content.

He had never been one to lounge around idly, and with this new hobby, he began getting up even earlier. Making use of the faint morning light, he would bustle about, and without even brushing his teeth or washing his face, he would head straight outside, walk past the sealed doors of the tailor's shop, over the damp wooden bridge, past the quiet, uninhabited elementary school, and head directly for the fields at the edge of town, deep into the rows of grain.

Once there, he would stand firmly, stroke his flute, and play for all of the crops to hear.

He especially liked foggy weather, for it felt as if someone was loosely embracing him. He would be buried in the breast of the fog, playing a long note, a short note, practicing two old tunes, trying out a new tune. As he played and played, the fog would grow lighter and disperse as the yellow sunlight fanned out and little birds began hopping along on the ground. Only then would he would he put his flute away and return home.

The purpose of practicing all morning was to while away the time before he could go play for Kaiyin. On the road to Kaiyin's house, he kept his flute in his sleeve so as not to let other people see it. When Kaiyin's father would greet him, he would smile stiffly, straighten his posture, and enter the house.

Afterwards, he would wait for Kaiyin to drop her head and begin to cut paper before stealthily pulling out his flute. He was concerned that playing too close to Kaiyin would irritate her ears, so he always stood in a corner far away from her. Turning his

body to the wall, his lips pursed, he emitted a long breath of air and started to blow, then once again slowly release. He played so crisply and softly, his melodies twisting like a furtive spring wind caressing the catkins. If people would happen to pass by outside, they would always stop and listen for a while. The music would make them completely listless.

Kaiyin would not even raise her head, as she was always cutting, but Dayuan could see that she was listening. Her posture straightened and her shoulders relaxed, the clasped fingers of her left hand slackened, and especially when he would hit a high note, her hands would pause and hang in midair for a moment. Only after remaining separated for a while would her hands return to their work.

Moreover, the foggy air inside Dayuan's flute would begin to pervade her paper, becoming the red beads on corn tassels, becoming the dewdrops on the bodies of pairs of green caterpillars, becoming the three curving lines of green seedlings growing in the ridges between the fields.

When she had finished her design, just like in their youth, Kaiyin would let Dayuan put it away for safe keeping. Dayuan carefully received the paper-cut with both hands and brought it under the north-facing window to examine it closely. In the course of this first look, Dayuan would always feel bewildered for a moment. His head would become muddled and his eyes would become moist. How?! All of the things he had seen in the field that morning had already all run onto Kaiyin's paper… He turned his head to Kaiyin and smiled naively, thinking that nothing in the world could ever be better than this.

On Sunday, Dayuan would not come to see Kaiyin—that day revolved around Xiaoyuan. Xiaoyuan would come back from the county seat and do homework for half the day. During the other half of the day, he would spend his time under Kaiyin's north-facing window.

Now Xiaoyuan spoke with the strong inflection of a scholar and a bit of the local flair of the county seat. For example, the last one or two words of each sentence would always shrink as Xiaoyuan swallowed them into his stomach. This sounded a bit lethargic but usually just meant that he was restless. Also, when uttering certain long sentences, he would stick in a few unfamiliar Mandarin words; like golden strands woven into a length of cloth, they were especially effective at catching attention. In short, the feel of Xiaoyuan's high school sophomore speech could really be called fresh and extraordinary when compared to that of Teacher Yi. Everyone liked to hear Xiaoyuan talk, for it made them feel as if they were absorbing knowledge of some sort.

However, at Kaiyin's home, the volume of his speech was much lower than it was when he was outside. This was because, completely unlike his flute-playing brother, he would sit right next to Kaiyin.

Of course, Xiaoyuan's closeness was much as it was during their childhood. He would always just slouch on Kaiyin's table watching her cut paper, but since he had grown up, when he laid his elbows on Kaiyin's little table, he practically filled it. As Kaiyin would continue to make her paper-cuts, she could not help but brush against Xiaoyuan. Each time she touched his cuff or his elbow, her face would remain as placid as water, but her ears, her light, boneless auricles, would slowly redden.

When he noticed that Kaiyin's ears had become red, Xiaoyuan would considerately pause for a moment, and cease speaking.

But he was not idle. Rather, he would turn his attention to scrutinizing a week's worth of paper-cuts sitting in front of Kaiyin. He would carefully lift up each piece and knit his brow, as if reviewing an abstruse lesson.

He believed that these transparent paper-cuts were just like a broken mirror, with each irregular shard containing a fragmentary but clear reflection, casting light onto all of Kaiyin's daily moods, revealing how she lived, ate, and slept.

Viewing things in this way, Xiaoyuan felt both concerned and unsatisfied: Kaiyin's life was just like a cup of clear water. When peering to the bottom of the cup, one saw that it contained neither rocks nor sand. Naturally, this was as it should be, but shouldn't something be added to it? Perhaps seaweed or sea creatures, reflections or ripples, or the like.

Oh, this thing, Xiaoyuan thought, was his to do.

As to how to do it, Xiaoyuan decided in an instant. He would tell stories.

…

Though Xiaoyuan was young and inexperienced, his inner world was as vast as that of any middle-aged person.

When classes were separated into arts and sciences during his second year of high school, Xiaoyuan chose the arts. This was something that Teacher Yi hadn't completely considered in the beginning: two boys, one in the sciences, one in the arts, much like a plant with two flowers, each with a single stem. Of course, Dayuan was not involved at all in the sciences later on, but Xiaoyuan's opportunity to pursue the arts was certainly

predestined. Literature, English, history, geography, and politics were just like the five fingers on his hands; he could casually stretch out any one to reveal good proportions and smooth movement. Naturally, when telling stories to Kaiyin, he understood the appropriate techniques. His storytelling was just like skimming cream from warm milk; the cream was certainly the most nutritious part, and was most suited to Kaiyin's appetite. In this way, each Sunday, Xiaoyuan became more than just another person coming to visit Kaiyin. When he would head to her north-facing window to sit with her, he was also sure to bring other guests, especially female guests: The Snail Girl, the Weaver Maiden, Lady Meng Jiang, the Seven Fairies, the White Snake, the Peacock Princess, Cui Yingying, and Zhu Yingtai.

And *oh*, these lady guests! This one passionately in love, that one warmly enthusiastic, this one risking death, that one coming back to life… When Kaiyin heard these things, not only did her ears become red, but her whole neck became red. One might imagine that even her insides were alight with the red of adolescent emotions, the red of an all-encompassing affection. With near-drunken eyes, she looked at Xiaoyuan sitting beside her and panicked for a moment: who does he think he is, and what is he attempting to do?!

Occasionally, Xiaoyuan would also bring some male visitors, but the main topic would remain the same, always "the cream atop the milk." For example, one day he told the story of Wei Sheng. "There was an amorous young man, called Wei Sheng, about as old as I am. And as for looks… well, he looked a lot like me. One day, he arranged a meeting with a girl he loved under a bridge… and as he waited and waited there, the water rose higher, but because he had promised to meet his girl, he refused to leave… in

the end, he wrapped his arms around a bridge column, was submerged in the water, and died."

When telling these stories, Xiaoyuan naturally used Mandarin, as it sounded more pleasant. He also liked to use choice vocabulary and well-turned phrases, as these were habits of humanities students. He would often say things like, "an absence of one day was like a separation for three Autumns" or "willing to be lovebirds in the heavens or embracing tree branches on earth" and so on. If Kaiyin's eyes revealed any doubt regarding a phrase, he would simply stop to explain the allusions and the pleasant sentiments they represent. In this way, what was just a story by name was actually a long saga embedded with smaller stories, larger ideas encasing smaller meanings, complicated and lingering.

Xiaoyuan would tell stories as Kaiyin roughly sketched on her paper. She would sometimes lift her eyes to peer at Xiaoyuan. The storyteller and the listener both found that their eyes were moist, and just like Wei Sheng, they were about to drown.
And it need not be told that on that day, Kaiyin's paper-cut was "Wei Sheng Embracing the Bridge Column."

That day, the paper-cut also entered the hands of Dayuan—and on this point, coincidentally, he was the same as his brother: he also liked to understand the events of Kaiyin's past day through her paper-cuts. After all, how else could he understand? Was he still waiting for Kaiyin to say something? So before playing his flute, he would hold the paper-cut in his hands and examine it from left to right.

He saw a bridge in the middle of an expanse of water. Half a face peeked out from behind a column under the bridge. Its dark, mysterious eyes were struggling to remain

open, revealing not fright but joy, though river water surrounded the figure and he was already half submerged.

What does this mean? Dayuan looked at Kaiyin.

Kaiyin shook her head. Even if she could speak, she would not be able to explain it clearly. She only knew that there was that bridge, and there was that person. Dayuan suddenly felt weak, and a tiny blister of unease arose within his heart. He thought that he had best take out his flute. Maybe he would feel better after playing. Maybe he could blow away that sense of foreboding.

…

Kaiyin's father was most likely a person who carried heavy worries with him, but he could not be blamed. Anyone with a daughter like Kaiyin and two guests like Dayuan and Xiaoyuan would only be blameworthy for not being worried. But Kaiyin's father was not willing to reveal his feelings. He would always hurry to conceal them, but his method of concealing them was extremely awkward.

For example, when Dayuan played the flute, it would have been appropriate for him to listen openly and offer a few words of praise. But he did not do so. The moment he spotted Dayuan coming to his house, his eyes would take aim at each part of the young man's body, searching for the flute. When Dayuan fell into his stare, the boy's frame would become stiff, then shrink, yielding from side to side. But Kaiyin's father would not give up. He would continue staring, as if to say: I know it, you've brought your flute, it's pinned against the back of your waist, hidden up your left sleeve, stuck up your right pant leg.

But once Dayuan really started to play, Kaiyin's father would head outside as if eager to hide. He would go catch chickens, gather firewood, dig ditches in the fields, as he didn't really know what to do to best occupy himself. At the point when Dayuan would put down the flute, it was as if he heard some sort of secret code. He would head home to once again search for the hidden flute on Dayuan's person.

When Xiaoyuan would come, he was even more restless, especially after Xiaoyuan started to tell stories. As Kaiyin listened, enraptured, he would stiffly wander about in the room acting scatterbrained, picking up a cup for a while, looking for a match for a while, always knocking into the corner of the stool or banging into the lintel, as if he had sprouted unwieldy spikes all over his body.

Xiaoyuan was no fool, and he quickly noticed this. He would stand up and turn around, intending to speak in an imposingly academic manner or to invite Kaiyin's father to listen to the story. Kaiyin's father would flush and casually wave him off: you keep telling your story, go ahead. And he would disappear instantly, without even looking back.

Teacher Yi would usually come over looking for his sons, as he had found both Dayuan and Xiaoyuan there in the past. These two sons displayed all sorts of differences, but they had one common defect: they had no sense of time when they were in Kaiyin's room. Their family members would await their return until the evening meal was cold, their stomachs were growling, and they were about to doze off. But it was no use. Teacher Yi simply had to go to Kaiyin's house and call them home.

Each time Teacher Yi would go, he would notice Kaiyin's father's distracted appearance. Teacher Yi felt somewhat sorry for him, but also felt a bit proud. He even

felt a common sense of fatherly empathy, though that emotion was subtle. Considering his own sons, and considering Kaiyin, he felt that the situation was both completely understandable and also most complex. Or perhaps it might not even count as a situation, as they were only seventeen- and eighteen-year-old children. How could Kaiyin's father be so impatient with them?

Teacher Yi really wanted to speak openly and reassure Kaiyin's father, but after some consideration, he realized that such things still could not be said. Once they were spoken, Kaiyin's father would become even more serious. So Teacher Yi behaved as usual. He headed into the courtyard and loudly shouted his younger son's name. Kaiyin's father also stood in the courtyard. He put on the appearance of a proper host, his temperament and his voice seeming quite calm: "No need to bother him, let him sit for a little longer. Kaiyin is happy when she has company."

"That's true, as long as Kaiyin is happy, it's fine. Everything is for Kaiyin's sake!" Teacher Yi hoped that Kaiyin's father could hear the bitter sacrifice insinuated in the tone of his voice.

In the future, the solution to the problem was actually quite simple: leave it to Kaiyin to decide.

3

In the last term of his third year of high school, Xiaoyuan stopped going to Kaiyin's house.

This was actually not due to any requests from Teacher Yi, but rather, was willed by Xiaoyuan himself. When he returned from the county seat on the weekends, he not only did not visit Kaiyin, but also stopped paying attention to all of the trivial carryings-

on in the town, and did not even care about the family's grain harvest. He would merely greet his parents in a simple fashion. He transferred all of his trivial chores to Dayuan. It was as if he had locked himself in a high-up fortress, with all of his family members lightly treading below him, speaking quietly under their breaths.

From the perspectives of outsiders, Dayuan was cold and distant toward Xiaoyuan, since he rarely spoke to him. But Teacher Yi understood that the enthusiasm with which Dayuan approached his relationship with his brother was more expansive than the sky itself, and that Dayuan was filled with awe and respect—Xiaoyuan taking the college entrance exams was a huge and weighty responsibility, and if he could help even a little bit, then he would certainly do so. To speak simply of one of his sacrifices, he would serve as "human insect repellant." During the summer nights, the mosquitoes were not simply plentiful. They were as plentiful as the menthol solution used to repel them, and it was useless to try to quell their bites with oils. Knowing that his sweaty body would attract the mosquitoes, Dayuan would purposely avoid showering after working outside and would sit next to Xiaoyuan as he studied. If Xiaoyuan reviewed until midnight, he would just sit there until midnight, sometimes even falling asleep in that position. After all, as long as the mosquitoes stung him and spared Xiaoyuan, it was well worth it.

Moreover, while Dayuan may have been coarse on the surface, there was certain complexity beneath that coarseness. He could tell that, though Xiaoyuan was resolute in his studies, he actually missed Kaiyin, and would sometimes raise his head from his book and look outside, his eyes suddenly going blank. Dayuan knew that feeling—on previous Sundays, when he'd come across Xiaoyuan on his way to see Kaiyin, he would also feel

that kind of emptiness come over him. But now, he calculated that it had almost been three months since his brother had seen Kaiyin, and this was sure to cause some heartache.

Dayuan thought left and right. He snuck over to Kaiyin's house. He gestured for a long time, asking Kaiyin to make a long paper-cut, which he made into a golden bookmark and stuck inside Xiaoyuan's book in the dark of night. He was not willing to give it to Xiaoyuan openly. There was no particular reason for this, he simply wasn't willing. Starting from some unknown time, Dayuan and Xiaoyuan had stopped talking to each other about any topic related to Kaiyin.

Xiaoyuan instantly recognized the paper cut Kaiyin had made for the bookmark. It was an image of "Kuafu Chasing the Sun." Xiaoyuan had once spoken of Kuafu, with "two yellow snakes in his ears, and two yellow snakes in his fists." Kaiyin had remembered well, portraying Xiaoyuan's exact description in her work. Two little snakes hung from Kuafu's ears, and two more snakes were clenched in his hands. Grasping the bookmark, Xiaoyuan lost his concentration for a few minutes, a few glorious minutes. But he quickly came to, placed the bookmark to one side, and once again buried himself in his book.

This detail caught the attention of Teacher Yi. Upon first glance, he felt calm and gratified, but after thinking in more detail and connecting it to the coldness and determination in Dayuan's conduct, he started to feel that Dayuan's action was inappropriate. It was like inserting new cotton lining into the blanket of a sleeping man; this action was warm-hearted, but also somehow improper.

Clearly, Xiaoyuan was an ambitious youth. This ambition, to a great extent, was already far removed from mundane concerns and youthful attachments. This, of course, was a good thing, and was also in line with a moral teaching with which Teacher Yi perpetually indoctrinated his sons: that many successful people from past and present, China and abroad, seemed to be detached, and for the sake of their undertakings and interests could completely put aside the distraction of personal feelings. But when seeing that his own son had truly become this way, Teacher Yi actually felt slightly chilled. For the first time, he questioned the correctness of the morality with which he cultivated his children.

Actually, frankly speaking, the undertakings of successful people could never be wrong, Teacher Yi reprimanded himself. But he was worried about Kaiyin. After all, she was a girl, and a mute besides. Xiaoyuan had been so companionable before, but now suddenly neglected her without so much as a word or even a message. Though he understandably felt pressure to achieve fame and success, he was being downright unreasonable.

Thinking of this, Teacher Yi decided to go see Kaiyin. He thought, that girl's pair of eyes, how they must be filled to the brim with tears!

He had walked halfway there when he suddenly thought of something. He stood in the middle of the road and laughed.

Though Xiaoyuan no longer goes to see Kaiyin, Dayuan surely goes each day. Kaiyin is just like a flower, and people would naturally go to sprinkle water for her and provide shade for her. *Aiya*, Dayuan, that boy. Perhaps he was actually just a fool enjoying a fool's happiness.

He couldn't say whether or not fools are truly happy, but one thing was for sure: within the half year before Xiaoyuan took the college entrance exams, as if through divine intervention, Dayuan's flute playing suddenly made remarkable progress. Originally, Kaiyin's father had preferred to go outside while Dayuan played the flute, wanting to purposefully display an attitude of total aloofness. But this was no longer possible. Dayuan's flute, with its far-reaching and bright sound, its melancholy and translucent sound, traveled back and forth through the corners of the front of the hall and the back of the rooms, traveled to the body of the dozing tabby cat, traveled to the daydreaming little bench, traveled to the small flame in the kitchen stove, and finally, traveled to Kaiyin's father's trouser legs, such that no matter how he tried, he was held fast and could not walk away.

Yes, Kaiyin's father believed, it was not his ears, but rather his pants that were pulled firmly by Dayuan's flute. Yet Dayuan did not want to tug on Kaiyin's father, nor did he want to tug on anyone's heart. He was different from Xiaoyuan. He had always lacked ambition and intention.

Starting from the first day, the very first day he had put the flute to his lips, the sound of the flute became like the unspoken words that filled his heart. This kind of message from the heart is fragmentary and unwritten, and it's not often that one can hope for anyone to hear and understand it. But if this message were not released through music, it would certainly suffocate him. Therefore, he played away on that flute, and though observers thought it was to please Kaiyin, he himself knew the truth: he did it to save himself, to overcome his humble silence and the heavy shroud of his worries. Besides, what else could he do?

From the sound of Dayuan's flute, Kaiyin had now learned how to sigh.

The sound of Dayuan's flute was pleasant. She liked to listen, and she understood, she recognized the humble silence and weighty worries within it. But it was ultimately not the same, just not the same as Xiaoyuan's stories—

Kaiyin would always become absent-minded through the sound of the flute, and in her imagination, Xiaoyuan would waltz in, wearing his white dress shirt just like before, and would sit down, his two arms taking up the space on her little table as he spoke to her ceaselessly. When he finally finished talking, like magic, another female guest would appear beside him with another touching story to enthrall her with surging thoughts and emotions. But, he would not come again. From one Sunday to the next, he had yet to return! Xiaoyuan was really no good, using so many stories to leave her hanging in the air, and now not even caring if she dropped to the ground. She was hurt to the point that she could not even concentrate on Dayuan's flute.

Ai, it cannot be said that Kaiyin lacked a conscience, but all people are this way, unknowing of and uncaring for what they hold in their hands until it is gone. So, with no other options, Kaiyin finally started to sigh.

From a speechless girl, the first sigh is really quite stirring. Much like a distant wind blowing over from atop the lake, moist and sweet, and also heavy, begging anyone to reach out a hand and grasp it.

Kaiyin's father was squatting under the eaves, pulled fast by Dayuan's flute, when he suddenly heard his daughter's sigh. Somehow, an old tear fell. He felt a kind of desolate happiness: his daughter had grown up.

Once she could sigh, the work Kaiyin produced also became somewhat incomprehensible. One day, she handed Dayuan a paper-cut of a cat. The cat's see-through stomach revealed a sleeping mouse. The mouse had not been eaten, but rather, it seemed to be hiding in the cat's stomach, taking a rest. The cat was its warmest, most comfortable mattress and blanket.

Cat and mouse, a pair of mortal enemies, how could they be like this? Dayuan felt that he must be very slow. He looked at Kaiyin, who seemed to smile without actually smiling. She pointed at the mouse, then pointed at herself—she had happily let the cat swallow her whole.

Oh, then, who is the cat? Dayuan did not completely understand, but he felt a faint sense of excitement: do I look like a cat?

Kaiyin's gaze roamed about slowly, not willing to reply.

…

Other than playing the flute, Dayuan did not have other ways of passing the time, so he would just go work in the fields. When it came to all manners of physical work, his propensity was clearly much stronger than it was for homework.

When hauling water, if he felt joyful, he would suddenly drop the carrying stick and lift up the pails in each hand, the muscles in his arm bulging, calmly heading to and fro without losing a drop. When the weather was not yet warm, he would take off his shoes and socks and stamp barefooted on the newly-thawed earth. Raising his hands high, he would sprinkle the spring's first handful of seeds. In the summer noon, when the sun shone down in silence and the entire little town seemed half dead, he alone would walk into the sun without even a straw hat, as if ready to fight someone, hoeing plot after plot

of grass, sweat forming in layers. He felt extremely pleased, panting dog-like with his mouth wide open.

The enthusiasm and earnestness with which Dayuan treated the farmland was noticeable. The farmland was also not without a conscience, and it changed its way of repaying him—at nineteen, it was clear at a glance that Dayuan's shoulders had broadened, his skin had become dark and smooth, and he had grown a beard and leg hair. From behind he appeared every bit a man. When he and Teacher Yi walked together, the father looked like a shriveled cucumber by comparison, shrunken down into a big roll of skin.

And so it was. Children became adults, and adults became elders. Kaiyin's father also aged. The feeling of suffering that closely follows old age seemed to make him age even faster, and daily labor came closer to being completely neglected with each passing day. This was especially true at the solar term, at the occasion for rushing to sow the fields. At that time, he would especially miss Kaiyin's deceased mother, for no other reason than that things would have been much better had she given birth to a second child, a son.

Teacher Yi was always considerate, and when he saw Dayuan's sweaty, tireless body, he sent him down to Kaiyin's father's property to help.

"Ok." Dayuan received his orders, and as if his feet were spring-loaded, he bounded onto the road. The pounding of his feet was audible far into the distance, as if they were beating out the rhythm of his delighted heart.

Led by this joyful rhythm, he tidied up every corner of Kaiyin's family's property. He diverted water, straightened seedlings, made every part of the farm

picturesque. He tidied the scrambled straw piles in the drying yard, added new dirt, singlehandedly pushed the big stone grain roller circle by circle with precision, cleaned up the disheveled pig pen and store room, and even happily piled up firewood. Kaiyin's whole property instantly looked like a newly married bride, washed from the inside out, rubbed with perfume and decorated with flowers.

At dusk, Kaiyin put down her scissors and walked about every corner of the property—each day, she would discover some miraculous new changes. She adjusted her head as she went, seeking Dayuan with her eyes. Suddenly, Dayuan was standing near her, his sweaty body emitting a slightly pungent smell, bones and muscles bulging beneath his wet shirt as if leaping up and down, making it difficult for Kaiyin to draw her eyes away.

He would do both heavy work and skilled work without a sound. Kaiyin often discovered that her hot water bottle had been filled to the brim with boiled water. After a rainy day, the glass on the north-facing window would be wiped to a transparent shine. Each time her candles were melted, someone would exchange them for new ones. When her carving knife grew dull, someone would grind it for her, making it neither too sharp nor too dull, just so.

Ai, living in this kind of intimacy with the kind yet silent Dayuan… Kaiyin was not a piece of wood, she was a compassionate and determined girl. And one day, she suddenly discovered, it had been a long time since she had thought of Xiaoyuan. Really, a very long time.

4

Xiaoyuan's college acceptance letter was not actually an acceptance letter. It was a magic letter. Almost in the blink of an eye, it performed a number of tricks.

First it entranced Tumba's postman. That guy felt proud just to have a uniform and an official badge, and always seemed to have a kind of calm, superior air about him. But that day, under the spell of the magic letter, he became completely flustered. Since the letter had come such a long way, when the postman arrived at the edge of town he started hoarsely shouting: Teacher Yi—Teacher Yi—

People on the road heard this and were all startled, and as if they had been bewitched, they dropped what they were doing and crowded behind the walking postman. "What is it? What is it?" they asked again and again.

The postman ignored them, and just kept shouting, as if on fire. The afternoon summer weather was extremely hot. Dust floated up from the road and shimmered in the air, making everything appear blurry and unsteady.

In the glistening hot air, Teacher Yi was dragged from his home. He was bewildered, wearing a sheepish and self-possessed smile. Yes, he felt a sense of anticipation, as if he had just caught the delicious scent of good luck floating his way. But only, he did not know, that pot he was about to open, did it contain a chicken, a duck, or a big, fat goose?

It was a big, fat goose! No, it was bigger than a goose. One could say it was a sheep, a pig, an elephant!

"Bei…jing Uni…versity!"

Someone read out sharply and abruptly, his voice piercing, steeped in an indescribable madness.

To hear Beijing was big enough; to hear university was lofty enough. But now, to hear the two together, this was just terrifying, as it was nearly explosive! It was as if the necks of all of the people had been suddenly lifted up by the hand of a magician, pulled taught on the end of a string, mouths hanging open in the air. They crowded and brushed against each other, staring at the front door to Teacher Yi's house. In the midday sun, that black hole of a door suddenly became gloriously illuminated, like a noisy stage, for Xiaoyuan was sure to soon pass through it.

Xiaoyuan was under the attention of all those people. They had to look carefully, so as to later be able to retell and mull over the details of the event—the napping Yi Xiaoyuan, behaving as if there was nothing out of the ordinary, rubbed his eyes and came outside, his white face marked with two light red lines from the sleeping mat. Teacher Yi stiffly handed the admissions letter to him. Xiaoyuan took it, and his eyes fell lightly onto the inscription: Beijing University. He finally brought the letter to his lips, closed his eyes and slowly kissed it…

Oya, the red prints on his face, his sluggish movements, the lingering kiss on the letter's inscription. People slowly looked back on these peculiarities and thought, what kind of behavior is this!? So calm, so familiar, so romantic! All of the observers had been stupefied, turning as lifeless as logs languishing under the summer sun.
He had never received an order, this Yi Xiaoyuan. And in the future, he definitely would not have to answer to anyone. He would have a different sort of life, the kind of life for which most people would risk death. All of the townspeople thought that this future life would be unimaginably rich.

Kaiyin's father was amongst the crowd. He didn't know why, but suddenly, he secretly started to sweat and felt incredibly frail. It as if someone suddenly stuffed something extremely valuable into his hand, but this valuable thing was as fragile as a smooth vase. He could not hold onto it, could not grasp it tightly, but at the same time, he dared not let it slip to the floor and smash to pieces.

Kaiyin's father struggled, squeezing his way out of the crowd and heading home. No matter what, he had better give Kaiyin the good news. Right, and also tell Dayuan, who was working in the fields, helping to harvest Kaiyin's family's corn.

Kaiyin's father thought that he had walked quickly, but when he arrived home, he discovered that, compared to the legs of young people, his were already good for nothing. The triumphant scholar, Yi Xiaoyuan, wearing a new short-sleeved white dress shirt, was sprawled on Kaiyin's little table, picking up all of Kaiyin's paper and scissors. He spread a large map on the table. He hovered over it, showing where the red five-pointed star represents Beijing and the approximate location of the unmarked town of Tumba. He explained that he first needed to ride a tractor to one place, then take a long-distance bus somewhere else, and finally take a train to Beijing. And in the distant future, who knows? Maybe he could even fly in a plane!

Kaiyin was interrupted from her paper-cutting and traveled far away, her eyes following Xiaoyuan's movements over the map. It was her first time seeing a map, so fine, complex, and amazing, and she was overcome by an infectious excitement. No, this excitement was not only because of the map itself. It also had something to do with the person pointing to the map.

Up until then, Kaiyin had gone too long of a time without seeing him, watching him lean against that little table. She looked at him: so white, the whiteness of lengthy study; so thin, shoulders and hands that have never carried heavy things, the thinness of a lifetime without having to labor; and so merry, as if ready to take to the air in flight, as if he could soar to the heavens…

When she viewed Xiaoyuan in this way, all of those stories that he had told her in the past, those stories that she often dwelled upon in heated agony, all flooded back in a moment. But she realized that the stories all carried the same themes: sadness, pessimism, tears falling like rain in a pan; the female guests from the stories stealing a moment to speak with her, competing for her attention in her mind, giving her heart-wrenching counsel, risking their lives to drag her back from the edge.

Kaiyin told herself: not bad. Beijing, good, it's a good place. University, good, also a good thing, but all of these good things are all Xiaoyuan's to enjoy, and have nothing to do with you, Kaiyin. You speechless country girl, you'll have to stay here for a lifetime, so Xiaoyuan's whiteness, thinness, and merriness, you'd best not covet. You'd best not miss him, because you need to know that, at the very end, Xiaoyuan definitely will have nothing to do with you!

Brave Kaiyin listened to her own advice. This girl, in the midst of her palpitations, subconsciously put down the map. At the same time, as if fearing being alone, she picked up her scissors and paper.

At this time, Kaiyin's father ignored his daughter. All of his attention was focused on his honored guest. Consider: this university student, the first family—no—first person he gives the good news to is Kaiyin. What could this mean? What does this predict for

the future? Look at him, that white shirt flapping in the wind like a great, triumphant *peng* bird, that authoritative hand moving like the hand of a general… As he looked Xiaoyuan up and down, the more Kaiyin's father observed, the more excited he became. Suddenly he noticed that Xiaoyuan was standing up while speaking. He quickly tugged at Xiaoyuan, urging him to sit down. He suddenly remembered that he should go pour his guest a cup of water; once he poured the water, he realized that it was too hot and that he should go use well water to cool it down, and should probably add a bit of sugar…

As he was hurrying about, Dayuan came in, carrying a huge load of corn on his back. Kaiyin's family had four plots of cropland, and Dayuan had harvested more than half of the crops in the course of three days. Having just walked out of the bright sun, he squinted his eyes, unable to see anything clearly. Brown sweat ran like a small stream from his coarse trunk, joyously flowing downward. A white corn bug was crawling on top of his hair, but he was completely unaware. An innocent smile spread over his ruddy face.

Abruptly setting eyes on Dayuan in this state, Kaiyin's father finally gained his composure, as if someone had just poked him in the waist. He felt a rush of redness go to his face, as if ashamed of himself. In his humiliation, he made a decision in a flash and placed the just-cooled cup of water into Dayuan's hand.

Dayuan took it with surprise, drank a sip, and got an even bigger surprise: "*Aiyo*, it's so sweet!"

Kaiyin also stood up in front of the map, walked to Dayuan, and extended a cool finger, helping him brush the corn bug out of his hair.

Dayuan dropped his head. In this enormous happiness, he was truly afraid that he might suddenly faint.

Xiaoyuan was dazed. Even though this had taken place in only a short time, just a moment really, he had not anticipated such a chain of events to unfold. He neatly folded the map and said to Kaiyin: “I’m giving this to you as a memento.” Then he stepped forward and embraced Dayuan. “Brother, have you heard my news? Dad had me come to tell you to head back early. Tonight, we’ll drink wine.”

…

With regards to wine, Teacher Yi had told his sons of its many ills while he practiced calligraphy, and he always had an air of purity about him. “You should touch neither a single glass of wine nor a single cigarette. Especially wine. Alcohol will make you depressed, make you confused, and cause chaos. This is its nature.

But tonight was different. Teacher Yi might as well have said, “Wine can make you happy, can liven things up, can bring out the truth. It is truly heaven-sent.” This was the first time that Teacher Yi had made such a decision in all of the time bringing up his sons. Only this time, and it would not be repeated.

The dirt courtyard had already been sprayed with water, dusted with burning cattails, and dotted with insect repellant. A few small dishes were placed in the middle of a short table, along with two bottles of expensive wine. This occasion was heavenly indeed.

It was wonderful. Xiaoyuan was happy. Dayuan was even happier. Teacher Yi was the happiest. Father and sons three, each scrambled to pour wine for the other two,

scrambled to put their glasses high above their heads and toast each other, scrambled to pour wine down their own throats.

Dayuan and Xiaoyuan toasted each other the most. Xiaoyuan had much to say, prattling on as if reciting tongue twisters. Dayuan could barely contort his mind enough to understand.

"Big brother, without you, there would be no me. Brother, I toast you."

Dayuan drank.

"Don't worry, don't worry at all, no matter what, I will never contend with you. For this, you should toast me."

Dayuan made a toast.

"My future will be good, and yours will also be good. Our two fates, though not the same, will definitely be good. This time, let's toast each other."

Dayuan and Xiaoyuan both leaned back and drank.

The two brothers drank endlessly, drank until the wells of their eyes grew wet, as if in the immense heat of the summer even eyes could sweat.

After they toasted together a few dozen times, Xiaoyuan then toasted himself a few times. On this day, he was satisfied with everything. After ten years of hard study, seeing his name on the list of worthies was naturally a good thing. Drink a glass. In his wild joy, remaining calm, acting as if it was all easy, this was also good. Drink a glass. Leaving the crowd with indifference, first going to give Kaiyin the good news, this was also good, as this was doing right by her. Drink a glass.

And later, with Dayuan, using such a gentle and sympathetic tone to call him home, this was even better—a true sense of fraternity, as if never so strong before, touched him and made him wistful. But that was good too. Drink a glass.

But the thing that made Xiaoyuan happiest was that all of these details, made in heaven as they were, had never been painstakingly planned. He liked that about himself: he was natural, open and upright, low-key, just as his father had often taught him to be. Right, and there was also that lesson that his father had not often taught—Xiaoyuan suddenly realized that a strong individual was doomed to learn how to let go of his tenderness, as he had to do with Kaiyin.

Well, in order to understand this lesson, he should drink another cup. He rubbed the acceptance letter in his pocket while he drank.

In comparison, Dayuan's head was not as clear as Xiaoyuan's. Maybe, before even drinking the first glass, he had already been half drunk.

What day was this? Since when did people pour glasses of cool, sweetened water for him? Since when did Kaiyin start standing up on his behalf? And reaching out her hand, and brushing his hair? Why did so many fine events have to come so close together? It was as if he went from holding out two empty hands to having a thousand strands of gold wrapped around his waist, drowning him in an instant…

But unlike Xiaoyuan, he would not toast himself, and he was not proud of himself. Much the opposite. He was only thinking fatalistically. On this kind of joyous day, who should he thank? Dayuan clasped his glass and thought at length, not knowing how to repay such pleasure.

Perhaps he should thank that corn bug, white with two black eyes on its head, the freshest corn bud syrup in its stomach. He should thank it for making its long journey onto his head, traveling such a long way in the hot sun with him, fighting all of the time not to fall off, struggling to wait until the moment that Kaiyin's finger would come to brush it off…

Well then, make a toast to the corn aphid, make a toast to the cool, sugary water, make a toast to Kaiyin's finger, and the fiery hot sun, and the grain baskets, and everything that treated him with respect, and all of the things that accompanied him each day…

"You continue to drink. I'm going to write some characters." Teacher Yi jovially put down his glass, suddenly remembering his calligraphy.

Uninhibited, he poured a glass of wine into his inkstone. Wine and ink stick, that inky fragrance really captured his fancy, as if, were he to stretch out his neck, he could pour that ink down into his stomach. He wrote:

> "Seeing the lamplight appear again, from far away it looks very bright, but approaching, its brightness dies quickly. Floating on the current in a boat, we see the first auspicious sign from the light tower"

Teacher Yi was a long-time copier of the poet Yan's script. When he placed his brush on the page, he was always writing "Tower Monument," never making impromptu splashes or strokes. When copying Chen Fahui, there was a kind of conservativeness with the ink that became a rule, a devotion and kindness, a feeling of peace. After all these years, he should really thank dear master Yan Gongzhen; because of him, Teacher Yi had written so much calligraphy and spoken so many valuable truths to his sons. Apparently, the heavens still open their eyes. They have planted two trees for him. One grew up tall,

so tall that even the philosophers all raise their heads to look; the other tree grew deep, into the dirt, to the deepest place, such that no one will ever think to uproot it. How fortunate he was! What a glorious crop!

"Dayuan, Xiaoyuan, today is truly 'a day of one's life to thoroughly wallow in pride, so don't let a golden vessel face the moon empty!' But sons, you can't forget, as we often said before, happiness is fleeting, and one certainly must not become so proud as to forget this. You must act with extreme caution…you have to remember, every person who has good fortune should be even more careful, even more modest, and must put himself below everyone…"

But pretty much only Teacher Yi was paying attention to this message. Because it was his two sons' first time touching alcohol, they did not know their limits at all. One became whiter as he drank, the white of a future college student, and one became redder, the red of a winter coal fire. They were both already completely drunk.

Under the light of the moon, Dayuan and Xiaoyuan were like a big winter melon and a big pumpkin hanging in the corner of the drying yard. The early summer night dew lovingly kissed them, kissing their hunched chests, kissing their languorous fingers, kissing their newly grown beards, exceedingly gentle, like the gaze of the girl of their dreams.

That night it could be said that the girl sleeping in both of their dreams would definitely lose her own dreams.

…

So it was, Kaiyin lost her dreams. After having learned to sigh, she automatically learned to lose sleep. Her life was full of self-taught pain and sweetness.

She opened her eyes and gazed into the darkness before her, hearing her own eyelashes brush up and down. It was the sound of Xiaoyuan's white, billowing shirt brushing past, the sound of the sweat on Dayuan's body running like a stream. In the left ear, she heard Xiaoyuan's Mandarin-peppered sagas and short stories; in the right ear she heard the rolling sound of Dayuan's flute floating up from the corner of the room.

Dropping her head, she saw the map Xiaoyuan left behind. She reached her hand out in the darkness to touch it, rubbing its fold lines. She thought back to Xiaoyuan's finger moving across it. She felt that she was not even worthy of that map, as the map itself knew much more than she did—it knew about the life Xiaoyuan was going to start in the future, and about Beijing, the place where he would go.

Kaiyin sat up in her mosquito net and hugged her knees for a while, unable to feel at ease.

Forget it, I had better just cut paper.

The lamplight was the size of a pea, small but bright, shining on the fine hair on Kaiyin's temple, shining on the bluish place where her neck and collarbone met, shining on the hollow place at the chest of her nightgown, shining on the shadow at the curve of her waist. The lamp light flickered in excitement, as if it were the first time it had discovered that the person it illuminated was truly a girl who could break hearts and enchant, and could no doubt do so to Dayuan and Xiaoyuan…

The girl pulled out her most familiar red paper, opened her most intimate scissors. Good, now she feels much better. Now she need not think about anything else.

The scissor started moving on their own, as if they had been separated from the paper for too long. Thirsting, they came together like the closest of childhood friends,

gingerly telling secrets, completely ignoring Kaiyin, and even less concerned about Dayuan and Xiaoyuan. The scissors only loved the paper, loved it so much that it wanted to shred it to pieces, chew it, and eat it.

On this night, the scissors spoke many tender words to the paper, and strangely, all of these tender words were spoken twice; all of the caresses left symmetrical traces. The fish grew two tails, the tree became a forest, a tear became a pair of tears, and a man faced his shadow.

Kaiyin's father also sat up opposite her, hearing the lingering sound of his daughter's scissors moving about, creeping as softly as a cat. *Ai*, he thought again of Kaiyin's mother, and came up with a meaning for Kaiyin's paper-cut: from the beginning, it would have been best if Kaiyin had had a twin, an identical girl. That would have been wonderful, and all problems would have been solved. It's true, when they encountered hardship, Kaiyin's father always thought of she who had retired from the world early. He was secretly resentful, as if his deceased wife were the crux of every problem.

5

After Xiaoyuan went to Beijing for school, his image slowly dulled in everyone's eyes, like a star who had left the stage, glorious but reticent. Youths in Tumba who continued their studies were all forgotten in that way, as if the history of that piece of land would only extend so far. People were comfortable leaving Xiaoyuan's memory behind and going through life minding their own business. All of his good points and prospects, his future path to greatness, were all especially far away, and slowly became the stuff of children's stories and legend.

After Xiaoyuan left, fall came, and winter came, and then the farmers' slack season arrived. Then it was the season for people to come together and work, get engaged, marry, celebrate birthdays, thatch roofs, perform rites on behalf of the elderly, and so on. The town grew lively and bustling.

This was also the season during which Kaiyin was busiest. "Double happiness" designs as small as a basket or a palm, "longevity" designs half the height of an entrance hall, images of swallows flying over sorghum and five grains designs for new houses, colored banners and paper people used in sacrificial rites, these were enough to keep her occupied for a while.

And because Dayuan played the flute well, a performing band took a liking to him and he was pulled in to play for various public occasions. During weddings and funerals, he would play "Joy" and "Ascending Step by Step" or "Five Operas" and "The Song of Regretful Parting." In this way, Kaiyin and Dayuan would often both be busy working for the same person's event. This felt really pleasant, as if they were joining forces. Their tacit understanding really made people feel confident and at peace.

Only Dayuan's oversensitivity was a bit unexpected.

If a baby was born, or an elderly person left the earth, or some man and woman were joined for a hundred years of happiness, the content was mostly the same in each and every household, but Dayuan's eyes would always suddenly well up with hot tears. He was this way at weddings and funerals alike. His coarse eyelids would always begin to glisten shamelessly. In order to hide this, he would duck to one side, skulk below a window decorated with Kaiyin's paper-cut, take cover under this red "double happiness" vase design or that five bat "longevity" design, or a cat and butterfly "wealth" design,

softly playing his flute. He would play songs beyond those for which he was paid, one tune following another, placing his blackened fingers over the holes of the flute, moving swiftly, with deep feeling, endlessly sighing with passion and melancholy.

From the auntie of some new bride, Kaiyin heard about how Dayuan would lose himself in the moment. "I could see that he is big, but his heart is like cotton candy, so soft" the auntie said, grinning.

Kaiyin didn't smile. Rather, her small heart felt chilled, and even when her guest left, the coldness lingered.

—*Ai*, starting from forever having a faceless mother, starting from losing her voice, to Xiaoyuan moving farther and farther away, Kaiyin slowly started to understand that living was just like grasping a handful of sand, grains dropping out with each passing moment. In her moments of enjoyment, she needed to prepare well, prepare to bid farewell to certain things. On the other hand, Dayuan believed that life was like a good-natured plot of cropland; a seed dropped accidentally would eventually sprout and bear fruit. Being as he was, Dayuan really made Kaiyin a bit worried.

Dayuan did not know whether Kaiyin loved him, but he continued to love her anyway. The Kaiyin in his heart, like a goose feather, was softer than the half-breeze that blows and moves the grass. Every time he would return from playing at a wedding or funeral, he would not plainly express his empty suffering, but would become even gentler and more sincere. After he had drawn water and carried firewood, he would move a small bench and sit far away, waiting for Kaiyin to drop her head and begin cutting paper. He would then seize the chance to watch her closely, and every extra minute, every extra second was appreciated, was considered a boon.

In the room, his gaze became longer and thicker, as if someone had poured a big jar of honey from the air.

At these times, Kaiyin's father would never dare to enter the room, fearing that he would get his foot stuck in that honey and stumble. Seeing Kaiyin and Dayuan's speechless but meaningful exchange, he could not help but think back to the past summer and the wishful thinking he had often felt regarding Xiaoyuan; now he could rejoice even more! He had given that sugar water to Dayuan. He should have, should have given it to Dayuan, should have let Dayuan taste the flavor of sweetness. Yes, at some point, he should have a talk with Teacher Yi about this issue. There's no reason to let it remain unresolved for so long…

But waiting to speak with Teacher Yi involved waiting for a while.

…

In the past half a year, besides dealing with a few years' worth of important unfinished business, Teacher Yi had been corresponding with Xiaoyuan, sending a letter per week. He would add a serial number to each envelope and would write in a classical style, full of tireless instruction. This was all learned from the letters of the master Fu Lei. Teacher Yi certainly did not want to compare himself to Fu Lei, but his son, Xiaoyuan, could certainly be compared to Fu's brilliant son, Cong. However, the letters Xiaoyuan wrote in return were like reeds in the fall, each one shorter than the last. He explained to his father: busy. Too many new things to study. His correspondence was brief, did not allow much explanation, and carried an air of abruptness.

This point was also reflected in Xiaoyuan's break time. Xiaoyuan did not come home often during the winter holiday, since he wanted to attend all kinds of social events,

work on a research plan with a professor, volunteer, do a city-wide study, and so forth. When he would suddenly come home, his visits were always very short, and compared to before, he was more reclusive, spending all day with a book in hand, The names of those books were extremely hard to pronounce, and even Teacher Yi would look a few times, still not willing to read the titles aloud for fear of saying them incorrectly.

After dinner, Xiaoyuan would ramble about, saying he was going for a walk. This was a habit he had picked up in college. Other habits he had acquired included: eating breakfast and lunch as one meal, covering his mouth when he coughed, watching English news at eleven o'clock, and saying "excuse me" when he accidentally bumped into someone.

When out walking on the road, if he were to run into a neighbor, he would stop, and would be congenial and polite. But on a totally subconscious level, was understandably distracted. At these times, if one were to carefully study his expression, one would discover a sadness that was blind to reason.

So it was, Xiaoyuan discovered, after having left that place by himself, the feelings he had for Tumba grew stronger and more complicated each day. Those feelings were not just about tenderness and missing the place; there was also bitterness, and sourness, *ai*, as if he had aged several years out of thin air. Every time he returned to once again stand within the swath of dark cottages, smelling the light stench of manure and hay, it was striking to find that, compared to his memories, everything was much smaller and more cramped, shabby and gloomy. The money from his neighbors' year of toil was about equal to a fancy meal or the scarves around the necks of women in Beijing, which were all similar but different, too numerous to describe. The quietness and

complacency of this place was like a red cloth covering the eyes of all its people; in the future, they would just peacefully go about in their unknowing contentment…but Xiaoyuan could no longer do that. He had gone out into the world, so he knew that he could no longer find any way of being truly happy. How could one take off this red blindfold? By what method could Tumba become bright and bounteous? Xiaoyuan could not think of a solution, or rather, he dare not think too hard, because once the red veil was lifted, the result would not necessarily prove to be good…

Thinking in this way, Xiaoyuan would slowly wander towards Kaiyin's house. The small path he followed had been most familiar to him since the time he was young. At that time, in the process of walking that path, he had always been full of longing for the eagerness and sincerity of anticipatory love; on the way back, he would always feel tired but content. But now, what was he feeling? He didn't know. Even Xiaoyuan himself could not say clearly.

He circled widely behind the back of the house, and he could see the north window. There, Kaiyin's shadow reflected on the window appeared much like her paper cuts. It was light and thin, near at hand, and capable of being folded into a book and taken all the way to a far-off place.

After standing there for a while, his face blown to an icy coldness in the wind, Xiaoyuan started to head back home.

And so it was. He had no intention of pushing open that door and going in to visit Kaiyin. This was despite the fact that, even when in the middle of a big throng of lively and outgoing female classmates in Beijing, he would miss Kaiyin's silent lips and crisp gaze. But he had not fully considered actually meeting her again, and could not really

contemplate what would be appropriate to say to her. A lack of conversation topics left Xiaoyuan with an oppressive sense of sorrow. Today, in his mind, Kaiyin was no longer a girl he loved deeply, but rather, some kind of distant memory of childhood emotions, leaving the same bitter taste that he got from the rest of the little town.

6

Nobody had previously thought that Kaiyin's paper-cuts would suddenly become valuable, spread as if blown into the sky by a huge wind. This big wind came from above. Specifically which "above" and "above" to what extent were not so clear. But anyway, in that nebulous "above," paper-cutting was just a nickname; its formal name was "Folk Handicrafts", or "Priceless Cultural Artifacts," which sounded especially grand, like something that should be on television.

Kaiyin really did go on television, as was arranged by an organization. This "organization" first sent two people in advance. From their accent, they seemed to be from the county seat. They walked from door to door observing, taking pictures, and making notes on a pad. They even found some old folks to answer all sorts of questions. When they had interrogated everyone along the road and had only to interview Kaiyin, they were satisfied, and stopped asking questions.

After a while, the "organization" sent a few more people. When they talked, they started to lift up their tongues, so perhaps they were from the city. Once again, they looked around, took pictures, and asked questions. They then found Kaiyin, looked over her person and her paper-cuts and became very excited. They started whispering in each other's ears.

Finally, the "organization" made a big move and sent a truck full of strangers in shiny new clothing. It seemed that all of them spoke beautiful Mandarin. They got off the truck, then *pop, pop!* opened the cases of their black filming tools, and all circled around Kaiyin.

The whole town was dying of curiosity, and everyone headed to Kaiyin's house in a throng. But since nobody wanted Kaiyin to lose face, they worked hard to slow their steps and put on their most reserved expressions. They were just planning to temporarily go to Kaiyin's house and act like they had business to attend to there—borrow something, exchange something, or suddenly think to ask Kaiyin to make some type of paper-cut.

Kaiyin was still wearing her plain everyday clothes, and had brushed her hair into its shining everyday braid. She was still sitting under the north window that she liked so much. One needed especially sharp eyes to know that she was wearing a pair of new, snow-white socks with flowers decorating their sides.

Kaiyin had been informed of the event ahead of time, but had had no intention of dressing up. She had a plan, and knew how to look her best in an appropriate manner. She then used her black eyes to look over those strangers—like a gentle wind speeding over the surface of a lake, clean and cold, like a snow lotus on a high mountain. Almost all of the lens apertures opened in excitement, and the film crew trembled through their whole bodies.

Next, the strangers who had visited before knowingly picked up Kaiyin's book of paper cuts, showing each piece to the camera lenses. *Oya*, these paper cuts were really

incredible: a tiny landscape of a far-away place, dewdrops and caterpillars, a carefully decorated well and fence, a pair of scenes with characters casting shadows…

Finally, when the sky had darkened, the novelty-seekers from far away had been loaded to capacity with information. They rolled out like a wave, and the observing children were picked up by their mothers and taken home like shells left on the beach. Teacher Yi was the last remaining visitor, and it was Kaiyin's father who had tugged on his clothes, encouraging him to stay. Of course, Dayuan was also there from the beginning to the end. He sat on the small bench where he usually sat, looking for Kaiyin's flashing, busy eyes from behind the heads and bodies of the visitors.

Kaiyin's father was pitiful. At a loss, he looked at Teacher Yi. His expression was a bit strange—maybe it was a problem with his chin, for in the minutes that had just passed, he had smiled too much and his jaw felt stiff.

"What is this about exactly, and what will happen in the future? Teacher Yi, you explain it." He also pushed Kaiyin to one side, for he also wanted her to listen, listen to what Teacher Yi had to say.

Teacher Yi stared blankly for a moment, his hand making motions, as if he had just grabbed a brush to write "Tower Monument" just like before, when the two brothers would stand there—their presence would have made things a bit better, would have helped him organize his thoughts.

"The world changes fast. These upheavals can be quite intense for us."

"What is opportunity? What is opportunity that changes fate?"

"The key of keys is to make a good thing even better, make it last even longer."

Since he was not actually writing characters, Teacher Yi's words were not coherent. He was stringing one unrelated sentence after another. Kaiyin's father's chin was pulled in, and his eyes blinked constantly. He completely understood the words that Teacher Yi spoke, but when he put them together, they confused him.

Kaiyin's eyes suddenly brightened a few times in the dark. As it was, she did not totally understand either. But something unobstructed her eyes, and they brightened like a flame—whatever it was, she had experienced it before, a similar feeling of hunger, a similar feeling of desiring a bit of something. In some corner of her heart, something crouched as quietly as a cat.

The strange flame in Kaiyin's eye made Dayuan feel as if he had suddenly been burned. Sitting on the bench, he wriggled his body in discomfort. The bench could not take a heavy load; it creaked, as if releasing a self-abasing sigh.

Things that were in the past were gone, just like a big piece of rock thrown into the water with a *plunk*. If one looks at the surface, nothing is visible. But the water itself knows that, in its heart, there is a rock.

…

This rock sat in Kaiyin's heart. During the day she pretended to forget it, acting as if she were even calmer than normal. Now, the number of people coming for paper-cuts was greater than before. People from neighboring villages, and neighbors of the neighboring villages, would all come from afar—one to talk about paper-cutting, one to see that girl—they had heard that she was born quite beautiful, had heard that she could not speak, heard she was on television. In the end, even though Kaiyin never left her home, her reputation expanded many times greater than before. This had resulted in her

becoming quite busy, which was a good thing. At minimum, she could keep calm during the day.

But once night fell, within her curtain, that empty place, she slowly brought out that stone in her heart, turning it over and rubbing it.

She always remembered the day when she was filmed for television, those people who came from outside of town, their movements, expressions, and smells, the tone of their voices, so trendy and tasteful. This was something the little town had never experienced before.

Yes, exactly at the time of the filming, Kaiyin strangely thought of the map Xiaoyuan had left behind. It was totally unrelated, but she thought of it anyway—if, she thought, if she had enough opportunities, she would become like the tip of Xiaoyuan's finger, traveling over the map, heading beyond, going to far-off places…but, how exactly should she grasp such an opportunity? How could she travel farther and farther across Xiaoyuan's map? This, according to Kaiyin, was too grand an idea. Furthermore, if she really planned to travel afar, what would poor, sensitive Dayuan do?

Forget it, she had better sleep first. The girl put the rock back inside her heart.

…

There was another rock that was concealed in Dayuan's chest day and night.

It must be known that Dayuan was not a talkative person, but speaking little does not necessarily mean thinking little. In reality, though he pondered things more than the average person, others would often neglect him, believing that he was very simple and slow. Dayuan also pretended that he was dim; he had fooled the masses and also fooled

himself. But there was nothing he could do about it. It was impossible to pretend that the stone in his heart was not there.

Dayuan had one thought that was especially foreboding and obstinate: the Kaiyin who had been on television was not the same Kaiyin as before. She now belonged to everyone. She was a public person. Before, she was much like a jade pendant worn close at his breast, hidden in his clothes, with only a few close family members aware of its existence; but now, something was not right. In an instant, many people came to take the pendant from his breast without explanation. Perhaps this was not worth pain and self-pity…but the thing that made Dayuan most unhappy was that the piece of jade itself was perfectly content letting others see it. This glossy pendant, hidden in the darkness for years, had been collecting itself in anticipation and cooperated with its admirers, jumping before probing eyes in a flash…

In his heart, Dayuan unconsciously felt estranged from Kaiyin, which brought him anguish and depression.

As before, he would play his flute with the band, crying on behalf of other people's births, deaths, sorrows and joys, and as before, he carried the burden of all of the hard physical labor for Kaiyin's family. As before, at the start and end of each day, he would pull out his flute, and sitting in a distant corner, he would play for Kaiyin to hear. But the sound of that flute had changed. His lungs lacked power, his breath was uneven, wavering about like the fears in his heart.

This clearly influenced the air in the room where Kaiyin and Dayuan sat. The air was no longer as thick as before. It had become like watered-down honey.

7

While Teacher Yi was writing the letter marked No. 113, he mentioned Kaiyin's paper-cuts and their fame as folk handicrafts and priceless cultural artifacts. Faster than ever before, Xiaoyuan replied. He didn't just send a letter. He came in person. Fortunately, Xiaoyuan happened to have about a month of free time between leaving one company and starting a new job at a different one. When he got the letter, he traveled back home through the night, at double speed.

Was it because this had something to do with Kaiyin? Not so.

"This thing with Kaiyin is certainly a good opportunity. As long as I do everything well and maintain a little moral integrity, I could really benefit the whole town. But I need to put in some effort." The moment he walked in the door, Xiaoyuan quickly uttered this statement, explaining why he had come in such a hurry. "Our town of Tumba is such a lousy place. Every time I come back I always want to find a solution, but have never been able to. Now, fortunately, because we have this, to say in a fashionable way, it is as if our town has a business card and can begin to make its way out in the world.

Make its way? Make its way and do what? Teacher Yi had no way of getting this clear in his mind in the moment, but he saw that Xiaoyuan's spirits were high. He felt that this couldn't be wrong, so he raised his shoulders and nodded vigorously.

Dayuan was in the little room arranging the bed that Xiaoyuan had not slept in for so long. Hearing this, also perked up his ears. Make its way? Let Kaiyin make her way out in the world? Wasn't she best off as she was now? Dayuan sat down on the side of Xiaoyuan's bed and set down his brother's travel-stained suitcases and bags. He glanced

left and right. He didn't know why those bags made him feel ill at ease, as if carsick. Even though he'd never ridden in a car, he was sure it was carsickness. His head was dizzy and his stomach churned and ached.

Xiaoyuan first hurriedly charged over to Kaiyin's house.

When Kaiyin received the news, she was heavily startled: What? Xiaoyuan had been in Beijing for so many years, scarcely even returning during summer and winter holidays, and suddenly, because of her business, makes a special visit to Tumba? What an honor! What a display of friendship!

This had the possibility of inflicting a fatal blow on Kaiyin, a huge and sweet blow that made her reminisce about Xiaoyuan fancifully. The girl quietly opened her map, her finger moving across its surface, repeating the path Xiaoyaun was taking—by that time, she and that map had become intimately acquainted.

When Xiaoyuan saw Kaiyin, he was unable to think about savoring her intricate expressions—he faked an exaggerated serenity and suppressed his affection. With a pressing and serious face, he made Kaiyin take out all of the copies of paper-cuts she had saved throughout the years. He also had Kaiyin's father prepare a long table, on which he placed the black folders he had brought. He put labels on the folders, and placed them in a row. On each label, he first used thick black characters to write Kaiyin's Work I, Kaiyin's Work II…

That kind of professional stance, that sense of giving it his all, made everyone stare with round eyes and deeply recognize: Kaiyin's paper-cuts are now truly something to behold.

To speak truthfully, Xiaoyuan had not seen Kaiyin's paper-cuts for a long time, not since the year he took the college entrance exams, and afterwards, not during his four years of college. But in those past few days, he completely dove in, not even coming up for a breath, not caring about anything else around him, including the quiet Dayuan, including Kaiyin and the secrets hidden in her heart. Perhaps it was the power of his ideas that had overcome those immature and sentimental things long before.

When busily compiling a few pieces of Kaiyin's work, Xiaoyuan discovered some problems. This was a good thing, and from the point of view of someone with managerial knowledge, a weakness was also a point of growth, which is to say, he found something that could help take Kaiyin to the next level.

Kaiyin's paper-cuts were thoroughly good. Everyone knew that. But this kind of "good" was boring and superficial. It was like a strand of hair wrapped around one's finger; even if wrapped around in a hundred different ways, it was still a hair! This was no good. He needed to pass her a long, strong, thick rope, pull her out of that deep well, pull her all of the way into a much broader world… this problem was too important. Other people such as Kaiyin's father, Dayuan, his father Teacher Yi, and those town neighbors all counted as adoring Kaiyin, but this adoration was of no use because they were just like Kaiyin, all sitting in the bottom of a well staring at a round patch of sky. No matter how they looked, the sky was always the same.

This thing was still really his to do. Xiaoyuan was glad. His face, which had not been graced with a smiled for two days, finally softened.

The rope Xiaoyuan prepared for Kaiyin was braided from many strands.

The first strand had to do with interacting with people, especially "higher-level people," and people in the media. The main point was, one must be neither overbearing nor self-effacing. Whether with big officials or little personalities, it was all the same. One should neither pander nor do things half-way.

This type of reasoning was easy to talk about, and also sounded simple to the listening ear. It was minimalistic. The two people who were overhearing the conversation, Teacher Yi and Kaiyin's father, also nodded along. Dayuan was not there, for he had gone to the fields.

"The fields always need working." He placed an old cap on his head. The eaves of the hat drooped down, but his eyes could not perceive this. These past few days, everyone had been hovering around Xiaoyuan and Kaiyin, as if joining together to pull a big boat. But Dayuan kept to his conventional way of doing things, and if he should go down to the fields, he went. If he should feed the pigs, he did that. If he should sweep, he swept, and he was kept quite busy. Everyone thought that when it came to Kaiyin's work, perhaps Dayuan could not offer any help, and it was best to just let him continue doing his everyday tasks.

The second strand had to do with remuneration and copyrights for the paper-cuts. The price definitely needed to go much higher. Kaiyin could not keep selling half and giving away half. There was no need to fear offending the country folks who begrudged expensive things; Kaiyin just needed to hold to the set price. This wasn't a matter of making or not making money, but was actually a kind of appraisal of value. If one wants to accomplish great things, remember: every detail has to stand out. Besides, copyright actually has to do with copies and the need to preserve secrets. In the future, if Kaiyin

discovered that someone was cutting her design, she could take them to court and make them reimburse her. This part need not be discussed in detail now, but would be useful in the future.

This piece of Xiaoyuan's theory seemed overly fierce, or perhaps the listening parties were a bit too soft. Overall, when he got to this point, the atmosphere turned less friendly. But Xiaoyuan was patient. He knew that reason was on his side, so he insisted on his logic, struggling to turn his theory from flour to dough, from dough to thin pancakes, which after fried a little while could be fed, one by one, to his listeners.

But the result was still very unpleasant, as all of his listeners still felt that this course of action was terribly incorrect.

Shame was written on Teacher Yi's face. He felt that his son had begun to speak in an unappealing way, so as to make him unable to lift his head. This implied that after all of that time Teacher Yi had spent lecturing on kindness and morality, just a few years of college had caused his son to forsake all of his earlier lessons.

Kaiyin's father even felt a bit upset. This Xiaoyuan! All he talks about is dishonest means. *Ai,* if other people cut a design like Kaiyin's, this is just a form of deference to her. But to talk about taking such people to court and forcing them to pay a fine…this sounds like the speech of a scoundrel!

Actually, Kaiyin's opposition was not as strong; after all, how could she conplain or shout? But her face clearly grew cold. If she were to burn her bridges, steel her heart, and listen to only Xiaoyuan, this might result in being scorned and abandoned by everyone else.

The third strand had to do with the paper-cuts themselves, particularly expanding and enriching the content.

During his second and third years of college, Xiaoyuan had twice accompanied a professor to the countryside to research folklore, so he knew of the vitality and influence of so-called "folk art." He also knew that there were some shortcuts to success in that. Xiaoyuan believed that, using his method, he could give Kaiyin a crash course in a very short amount of time. Yes, it still basically involved telling stories. Telling stories to Kaiyin was Xiaoyuan's specialty, and it was also his path and password to her heart. Kaiyin seemed to indicate, "Ok, it's best to totally listen to you." All of the listeners seemed tired, already lacking clear preferences. When it comes to things they don't completely understand, people are always likely to grow weary.

Fortunately, Xiaoyuan didn't want them to understand. His bravery was a front that had already sprung some leaks. He was planning to start with Kaiyin, and step by step, polish up the whole town. This way of thinking was quite far-reaching, and perhaps too lofty. But Xiaoyuan was quite an optimist and a romantic. This young man who had just graduated from Beijing University had some rather self-satisfied thoughts: maybe, not long from now, paper-cuts will become Tumba's special local product, and could be made into many things: paper-cut fans, paper-cut calendars, paper-cut lamps, paper-cut decorations, and so on; because of this, all of the village men, women, elders and children would earn money and become like all of the people in the outside world. They would make material and scientific progress. *Ai*, with all of these dreams taking flight in his mind, how could Xiaoyuan expect anyone to fully understand? It was not that his plan

was too high brow, but rather, Xiaoyuan was not willing to make others worry about this with him. These ideas were too huge and overpowering.

…

Xiaoyuan's stories were about to start again.

This time, Kaiyin and Xiaoyuan felt well acquainted with the process. There was a time when Xiaoyuan told stories laden with the enthusiasm and double meanings of youth. In those stories, he and Kaiyin, eyes facing eyes, saw the moon rise and fall, the tide come in and go out…

No, no need to think of that. Xiaoyuan suppressed a sudden welling of hurt and regret—this feeling was all too inconvenient.

At this time, Xiaoyuan's stories needed to become a bit more complicated. This was because he hoped that the resulting paper-cuts could obtain a special element that only Kaiyin could produce, such as images from traditional operas. This was something Xiaoyuan had concocted in the moment, and he was not too certain of it, but he wanted to try. He would tell the stories of Horse Mountain, Sanchakou, Preparing the River Camp, Fighting Dengzhou, Killing a Son before the Yuan Gate…

Kaiyin's eyes were the same as they had been a few years earlier, staring hazily at Xiaoyuan. Xiaoyuan evaded her gaze this time. He didn't want Kaiyin's affection. He only wanted her ample wisdom.

But Kaiyin still thought her mind was not of any use. It was just like using a pair of short scissors; when clamped down on the side of a design folded into eight layers, it could not even make a cut. But Kaiyin was not willing to make a fool of herself. Or rather, she was not willing to make a fool of herself in front of Xiaoyuan. But she wanted

to clarify something: if she did everything according to Xiaoyuan's method, in the end, where would he take her?

Kaiyin thought for a while, browsing the map Xiaoyuan had given her before. The map had already become very old, and the folds had all been rubbed white. Kaiyin picked up the map, and also took out the tiniest paper-cut of a swallow. During weddings, swallows were the most commonly used decoration. Because swallows go south and return north each year, they are considered the bird of "reliability." They also live and travel in pairs, meaning that they are deeply loving and loyal. Kaiyin was quite pleased. Even though she had just rummaged at random, she had happened to grab a swallow.

She spread out the map, then parked the swallow at the location of their small town. Of course, it was only an approximate location because, just as Xiaoyuan had said before, a town as small as Tumba would not have its name on a map. Afterwards, she raised her eyes, staring at Xiaoyuan, one hand lifting the swallow into the air, not knowing where to make it fly.

Oh! Xiaoyuan understood Kaiyin's meaning immediately.

He strategically grasped Kaiyin's hand and led her. The two of them led the swallow together, first gracefully heading East, flying to the county seat, hovering for a moment before heading south to the provincial capital; then, changing directions, boldly charging north, passing over the Yangtze, crossing the Yellow River. Filled with spirit, the swallow headed straight to the location of the red five-pointed star: Beijing.

Can I really? Kaiyin's eyes asked.

Of course you can! You have me! Xiaoyuan also replied with a meaningful look. After all, morale should be improved, not deflated. Xiaoyuan had understood this tenet from the days of his youth. Each time before taking a test, he would always tell himself: number one, you can only be number one, you definitely must be number one. In the end, after taking the test, he was always number one.

When Kaiyin suddenly became aware of Xiaoyuan's hand, she felt an immense, unexplainable warmth.

Kaiyin believed in Xiaoyuan. She carefully put away that far-traveling, high-flying swallow.

However, Teacher Yi and Kaiyin's father were not so certain about Xiaoyuan's plan.

Teacher Yi, from his consistent perspective, preferred the middling path. He liked to let nature take its course. But now, Xiaoyuan was taking all sorts of risks, analyzing every method he could use to succeed. He felt that something seemed wrong, and overall, he feared that he was not too comfortable with the situation. He had tried to say something to Xiaoyuan, but Xiaoyuan always seemed lost in thought, thinking and thinking. At one point, Xiaoyuan said: now is not like before, we can't remain content with a simple life. Everyone should take action. Action is the key to our times.

Kaiyin's father had not thought so hard. He only paid attention to his daughter's expressions.

These days, Kaiyin has been exerting herself non-stop, tortured by Xiaoyuan's stories from morning till night, endlessly drawing on her paper. In the blink of an eye, her jaw had noticeably thinned and her clothes had grown loose. Moreover, her father had

discovered another thing: Kaiyin didn't seem to be doing this for the sake of paper-cutting itself, but for something else, some kind of delusion or worry…This was something that Kaiyin's father didn't understand, and he also felt a touch of fear. It was truly frightful, not knowing what the future held.

But the two fathers covered up their true feelings. When they met, they would just select some prosaic topics to discuss or chat about something irrelevant. One common discussion topic was Dayuan.

…

In fact, Dayuan was worth talking about. Recently, he had been acting very strangely. His whole being had started to fluctuate like an abnormal thermometer.

He was especially reticent when he encountered Xiaoyuan, his father, and even Kaiyin; his face was bland, as if in the cold of winter, frosty, dripping icicles had formed there. But more surprising was his treatment all of the farm animals, tools, crops, fields, and all sorts of other non-human things. *Ai*, he had become extremely warm-hearted, extremely close to these creatures and objects, burning inside for them like a summer fire.

Whenever the family gathered for a pleasant meal in their courtyard, everyone else would eat and chatter, but Dayuan would not say a word. Instead, he would put his head under the table, shake the food around in his bowl, and toss out pieces of streaky pork to serve to a black mutt. When a fall frost fell, other people happily wrapped themselves in their blankets for a while, but Dayuan instantly thought of the shovels and trowels by the door, and that he had forgotten to bring in the baskets from the yard. This made his heart ache to the point that he had to throw on some light clothing and bound outside, even though those things that he carried back home to shake off and shine didn't

actually require any love or care. In the fields at the time of harvest, all of the muddy potatoes and peanuts, whether plump or small, would always receive his gratitude. He would hold them in his hands and admire them, then put them against his chest to warm them…

There were many other examples of this kind of curious behavior. The two older people saw with their eyes and felt in their hearts that Dayuan had lost his mind. How could he treat objects like a refreshing spring breeze on his face, while treating other people like the cutting fall wind that scatters the leaves? What was he unable to face?

When discussing Dayuan, Teacher Yi and Kaiyin's father acted as if they were performing a two-person Tai-chi routine. They avoided controversy and feigned ignorance, as if completely lacking understanding of youthful love. *Ai*, who knows why? But those two old folks, how else could they act?

Dayuan's descent into madness did not only affect his sense of hot and cold, but also his understanding of day and night.

Dayuan had recently had a constant misconception: the current daytime was not his day. No matter where he went, he felt that he was in the dark.

Clearly this had something to do with his flute, since the flute had something to do with Kaiyin, and Kaiyin now had something to do with Xiaoyuan—whenever Xiaoyuan comes, Kaiyin becomes fuller; once Xiaoyuan leaves, she becomes empty. Her emptiness or fullness had nothing to do with the outside world. This embittered Dayuan, as he could no longer find an appropriate time to play the flute for her. She seemed to have completely forgotten about his flute, neither asking for it nor pining for it. Since this was the case, Dayuan could only try to put it out of his mind. However, each early

morning and each evening, whenever his former time to play for Kaiyin would arrive, the flute at his waist would begin to writhe like a snake attempting to leave its burrow, twisting and turning, growing extremely slippery.

Not to mention when going out to play for those weddings and funerals—considering the price, there were some ordinary families that no longer asked Kaiyin to make paper-cuts—he would act as lonesome as before, standing and playing his flute under a window pasted with someone else's paper-cuts. He even felt chilled during weddings, as if he had lost his blanket in the middle of a dream, causing his whole body to become frigid and his pleasant reveries to slip away with the bed covers. However, this actually cured him of the defects that had once made wives and aunties laugh at him; his eyelids had finally matured, and would no longer produce tears on behalf of everyone else.

But once night would come, nature would start to renew itself, and Dayuan would welcome his own personal day, bright and intense.

Xiaoyuan's bed was near Dayuan's. The two beds were side by side, like two roads converging at a turn. Before Xiaoyuan went to sleep, he would casually share a few sentences with his brother. Of course, he would not talk about Kaiyin. He often spoke about entertaining things that he had done while in college in Beijing. Dayuan just silently paid attention, unable to add anything. After talking and talking, Xiaoyuan's voice eventually faded, and his breathing started to sound warm, relaxed, and at ease: he had fallen asleep.

When Xiaoyuan had just nodded off, Dayuan took off in a burst of speech, bubbling like the water he boiled for Kaiyin. He suddenly wanted to discuss Kaiyin with

Xiaoyuan, pierce through the tack paper and throw open the window, so to speak; really, he could not wait to wake up Xiaoyuan and speak earnestly with him. But Xiaoyuan tossed and turned within a dream, and Dayuan was deterred, deterred to the point that his body stiffened under his covers and he dared not move. He cursed himself: you've gone mad, how could you talk to Xiaoyuan about Kaiyin! This is something that shouldn't be said, must not be said, for it's not easy to talk about. You really must be faint in the head. After a few sentences of self-criticism, he finally crawled up, and as nimbly as a monkey, walked into the thick darkness. He walked accurately, straight under Kaiyin's window. Even looking from afar at a dark and hazy pane, he knew that his eyes were pointing at Kaiyin's north-facing window. He imagined he could hear the soft, deep breath of Kaiyin's sleep. In her dreams, she was possibly listening to the sound of the flute that he hadn't recently played for her.

With this dark and hazy pane and an equally dark and hazy imagination, Dayuan felt peaceful and content. His affection and hope for the human world completely returned again—miraculously, the Kaiyin of before still existed.

8

The price of Kaiyin's paper-cuts rose, not just ordinarily high, but to three times the cost of those created by ordinary people. This news was transmitted much faster than anyone had imagined. Kaiyin's father felt completely embarrassed. He was certain that everyone believed that he was a shameless old thing who had become completely obsessed with money and was preparing cash for his coffin; that his daughter had been on television once, and suddenly, he didn't know which way the sun rises. When he went out to tend to business, he would walk with his head bowed, as if looking for something on

the ground or hoping that another eye would appear on the top of his head so that he could see what kinds of gazes other people cast on him.

People could tell that Kaiyin's father was uncomfortable. Whether or not they actually had an issue to discuss, they would first come to chat with him before circuitously moving to the topic of Kaiyin, hoping to help smooth things over on her behalf. "We've all watched Kaiyin grow up, and now that she's successful, we're happier than you are. It's nothing; it's the way it should be. The price is appropriate."

Aiyo. Aiyo. Kaiyin's father hemmed and hawed, nearly wanting to cry. This is no way to be an upright person, and at such an old age!

But those wives and aunties also slowly came to realize that going to Kaiyin's house to casually discuss paper-cuts (which really just involved prattling on to Kaiyin about paper-cuts) or ask a small question was no longer an option. The whole situation was a little strange, and they could not totally understand it. But they knew that whenever they were lacking in knowledge and abilities, or whenever they could not understanding something, all they needed to do was listen and avoid breaking the rules. These new rules were set by Beijing University graduate Xiaoyuan; how could they possibly be wrong?

In fact, everyone was yielding, listening obediently, suppressing emotions. To the townspeople, Kaiyin was now was like someone who was walking away on a big road, with only her back visible to them. Fortunately, they still felt she belonged amongst them. If she chose to keep walking farther, they would watch from behind to help protect her.

…

It appeared that, at the present, everything was going according to Xiaoyuan's plan. There had been no missteps. Actually, it was not merely that there been no mistakes; the plan had proven to be brilliant. The real brilliance was in Kaiyin's paper-cuts.

One day, Kaiyin suddenly yanked on Xiaoyuan's sleeve, just like when they were young. In the process of wanting to tell him something or ask something, Kaiyin forgot her shyness, and started pulling him by the arm. Xiaoyuan went with her to below the north-facing window—

Kaiyin held out a few paper pads, which contained excerpts of the opera stories Xiaoyuan had told her. Kaiyin had cut each story in sets of three. Why hadn't she created more conventional four-panel illustrations? Xiaoyuan initially didn't ask. He peered at the paper-cut.

Kaiyin had tapped into her true skill. In these new works, negative and positive space flowed together harmoniously, producing the appearance of at least three dimensions. People and clothing were shapes on the paper, while props and ornaments were cut out. The faces and emotions of the characters were blank spaces and shapes meshed together. The angry character wore a long beard and long hair, each strand distinguishable. The sad character's tears fell like rain, and each individual drop could be counted. There was a night battle scene from "Sanchakou" that was all shrouded in thick darkness, enemies on three sides with only the whites of their teeth visible and their blades cold and bright. In "Chasing Han Xin Under the Moon", Han Xin stood on the bank of a cold stream, river water rushing past like the hand of fate. There was no way

for him to cross. Xiao He's naked feet were visible as he leaned his body over his fleet horse, not knowing that his boots had already fallen into the thicket…

This was not all. Kaiyin pulled out some even larger paper-cuts. The first was a huge plum flower from a rich wreath, with six hollow petals. The second was a six-sided "longevity" design woven around a blank paper lantern. The third was a picture of six giant *peng* birds joined by their tails as they flew south, their wings as blank and plain as the sky.

Kaiyin took the three paper-cut copies and alternated them, pasting them onto the petals of the plum flower, the sides of the lantern, and the wings of the birds—suddenly, the flower spun, the lantern danced about, and the big birds flapped their wings. The story became smooth and connected, like a conversation. No wonder she had cut out three!

As Xiaoyuan looked on, he truly felt he might fall back onto the floor. His heart swelled, and overwhelmed by his feelings, he hugged Kaiyin. He lifted her off the ground, and carried her into the courtyard, using his burning throat to give a high shout to Teacher Yi and Kaiyin's father, who had been having a leisurely talk: "Come quickly! Come see!"

Kaiyin's legs kicked aimlessly in the air. An immense happiness opened like a cotton flower, pulling the girl upward. Perhaps she was hugged to Xiaoyuan's chest because of those incredible paper-cuts, but Kaiyin felt that his hug represented her entire future. Only it was a pity that Xiaoyuan's month-long break had to come to an end, and he had to leave Tumba.

…

The night before he left, while taking his walk, Xiaoyuan went to say goodbye to Kaiyin. On the road, he thought back to vacation two years before. At that time, he had

been too pessimistic about his hometown. He told himself: just believe. Everything will be better. Look, things have already headed in the right direction. He was only anxious for this maneuver to go the way he hoped, push a little farther, change Kaiyin's fate and that of the entire town.

In these high spirits, he came before Kaiyin. The poor young girl was struck with a feeling of parting from love, and she could tell no one. She carefully concealed her pain, but felt that she was having more problems than she could cope with, or as if she was being split into a hundred pieces. When she poured water for Xiaoyuan, it splashed. When she moved the bench for him, she accidentally tripped him.
Xiaoyuan noticed Kaiyin's clumsiness and showed sufficient understanding: this time he had to leave, for he had a lot of things to attend to. She'd have to begin to totally rely on herself.

Xiaoyuan picked up Kaiyin's hand in the manner of an elder brother—as this was the role Xiaoyuan had given himself—really wanting to pass all of his big ideas and goals on to her. He had grown up with this kind girl in innocent friendship, and he wished that she would eventually welcome a brighter and more exciting life.

But, *ai*, no matter what, his hand, just like his words and his gaze, carried only that message of good intentions. However, Kaiyin received another message. After all, her hand was being held by someone. She could not help but lift her eyes to stare at Xiaoyuan with vigor. Kaiyin could no longer resist trapping him in this meaningful stare; she could longer control it. The good-hearted person before her had helped her, hugged her, and now had taken her hand. But tomorrow he was leaving, so what was she waiting

for? If she waited, her chance might disappear forever! Kaiyin summoned her courage, pulled herself together, and decided to put everything aside.

Kaiyin suddenly stood on her tiptoes, pressing into Xiaoyuan, sending out her lips, like flower petals.

The paper lattices on the north-facing window also seemed to have received Kaiyin's kiss. They were pasted with a moving cutout of two people's shadows. And Dayuan's flute started to play at that moment. It was playing slowly and coolly, unfolding in the darkness, as if reaching deep into the viscera of the night. It was too intimate to describe.

Did Xiaoyuan and Kaiyin hear it? This is unknown. But the peanuts in the field heard it and became forlorn. The locus tree by the road heard it and grew sad. The stone roller by the well heard it and was also deeply moved. Their tears turned into dewdrops, small and soft, sticking to their surfaces in beads.

Originally, that night, Dayuan had gone out to find Xiaoyuan. He had wanted to have a talk. Dayuan had ruminated for many days, and on the last day, when there was no turning back, he forced himself to make a plan: he definitely needed to speak earnestly with Xiaoyuan. His heart was almost out of hope, nearly thirsting to death. To take out this withered heart and give it to Kaiyin was inappropriate, but what could be wrong with pulling it out for his dear brother Xiaoyuan to see? That time when they drank together, Xiaoyuan himself had said that both of their futures would be good! Dayuan just wanted to ask: how could he make his own future good after all?

Dayuan walked with a stuffy feeling in his head. He walked straight under Kaiyin's window, where he happened to come across Xiaoyuan in the paper-cut shadow on the window lattice.

As for that fated instant, one need not ask. Dayan peered at the window as he had done in his youth. He took that unparalleled paper-cut and carefully put it away for safe keeping. He also put away his heart, which had been snipped to pieces.

…

It was only when the townspeople went to Teacher Yi's house to see off Xiaoyuan that they realized that Dayuan was gone.

He had left before Xiaoyuan. His bed had been tidied, and everything was as it had been. The farming tools he had so often used had all been burnished to a high shine, standing like soldiers in formation against the wall. The harvesting baskets had been piled up together, full and covered. During the long night before he left, Dayuan seemed to have tidied every corner with great attention to detail before finally picking up his flute and departing.

Aiyo, everyone who heard the news was filled with heartache, as if aching for their own sons. That Dayuan, so naïve and honest. He must have really wanted to leave, and he must have been prepared to suffer. What was he doing? What hardship was he unable to bear?

For some reason, all of the people turned their heads and looked at Xiaoyuan. They noticed that the color of Xiaoyuan's face was really dreadful. He had clearly slept little. He seemed to carry a heavy secret. His stepped with hesitance.

But what could he do? His ticket had been booked a long time ago, and work awaited him back in the city. He simply had to leave. Xiaoyuan looked at his father and looked at Kaiyin's father. Those two old men obviously had no sense of the complicated details of the matter. They were just forcing themselves to smile in hopes that Xiaoyuan could leave in a relaxed mood. The remaining issues could be dealt with slowly, at a later time.

Yes, dealt with slowly.

Xiaoyuan finally looked towards Kaiyin's home. Kaiyin's father called him in to greet his daughter, but Xiaoyuan shook his head, looking back one, two, three times. That was a place where a kiss had occurred, a place he had left in haste, without granting any kind of clear response.

Xiaoyuan was a good student, and he always believed that, in this life, people will always run into all sorts of problems, all of which certainly have answers, including a best answer. But the night before, his philosophy had been paralyzed, and his intellect had lost its sharpness. Facing Kaiyin, Xiaoyuan suddenly realized that during this most recent trip to the countryside, all of his actions had misled her. During all of their time joining forces, her hard work and cooperation represented a totally different departure point for a totally different goal.

So what could he do? Xiaoyuan undoubtedly had to relieve himself of this burden, for he and Kaiyin could certainly not go down the road to becoming lovers. Xiaoyuan gently pushed off Kaiyin's soft body, his lips tingling. He couldn't say a thing—for the first time, he admitted defeat to himself and gave up on one of life's problem. After an endless second, Xiaoyuan turned his back and fled in panic.

Walking rapidly through the night, he had considered Kaiyin. He thought of how he had left her alone in that room and was filled with a sense of injustice. He knew that everything had gone badly, and he felt a sense of premature desperation. Not caring for his newly changed shirt, he suddenly threw himself prone on the ground, pressing his four limbs against the icy mud, allowing hot, childish tears to roll down. The love he had felt for the old earth of this little town and its residents was like a gentle, dim fire. Now that this fire had burned others in such a way, he felt weak. It was all really hard for him to bear.

Xiaoyuan thought: from now on, I will seldom return here.

9

The town was then without Dayuan and Xiaoyuan. There had been a sensation of fullness before, with the two coming and going, separately dashing back and forth. But now the town seemed totally desolate, as if not a single blade of grass would grow. What was Kaiyin to do?

No one dared to ask her such a question, and nobody talked about the issue with her. *Ai*, to say it plainly, she was a mute.

But who was to say that she truly could not speak? Actually, she could speak. She spoke often and spoke well.

During the day, she talked to the scissors, the paper, and the window. At night, she talked to the light, the mosquito net and the inky darkness.

On rainy days, she talked to the eaves and the puddles. At dawn, she sat on the wood that Dayuan had piled, talking to the wheat and the little insects.

Aiya, that speech was like a geyser, like a cold volcano, like a bird filling the sea with pebbles, like a cuckoo calling for courage. No one in the entire world could understand, and no one could stop it…in fact, everything around her had become as lively as the paper-cuts in her hands! Often, after speaking all night with her paper and scissors, she would begin to feel that these tools were ungrateful, unreliable. She would glue the scissors into her right hand. If she wanted to strip them off, she had to use her left hand to dig at them. When she did so, the skin on her thumb and index finger would pull off, and traces of blood, like tears, would slowly gather, falling onto the red paper that had listened all night, dripping on a recently finished paper-cut. Like salt entering the sea, these drops of crimson blood became impossible to detect.

In this way, her paper-cuts were like a hundred grass sprouts or like snow falling in the cold: omnipresent. They were on the table, on the chair, even on the bed and the floor, spreading out and filling her space. They were waiting for dust to fall, waiting for their color to fade, waiting to see whether or not people would notice them. New paper-cuts would even pile on top of old ones. All in all, Kaiyin was always cutting paper, as if this was her only path in the world. And when on this route, she could forget about worries and emotions. She sometimes thought she could even leave this world and go straight to heaven.

Kaiyin's father was so scared that he closed himself off, not daring to talk to outsiders. He only quietly pulled Teacher Yi aside.

Through the long, slow night, the two fathers sat under the lamp, parsing out the current situation. *Ai*, what kind of odd occurrence is this! This time, they no longer practiced Tai-chi, but spoke honestly, heart to heart. They worked to discern the true

shape of things, but no matter how painful the discussion became, it was of no use! The situation was that simple, that desperate. Everyone understood, but nobody could solve the problem.

What is wrong with Kaiyin? How can we fix it?

This world only allows people to go forward with life. It certainly could not let anyone stand on the sidelines, and it could not block anyone. This was simply impossible. Starting from birth, each step one takes is foreshadowed, anticipated, all pre-destined. Kaiyin's road out of her world, far off in the distant heavens, yet close at sight, was winding smoothly. It seemed that if she called it, it would come to her.

…

After half a month, the effect of Kaiyin's stint on television became clear. It accumulated outside of town like a wave, rolling into something big. Larger and larger media venues took notice of Kaiyin. Even foreigners, with their sunken eyes and jutting noses, all came to see her—these people were even more unusual than the earlier visitors, for whenever they saw something handmade, they were completely struck dumb, entirely enthralled. The few streets that existed in Tumba, Kaiyin's family's three-room house, the north-facing window, the little table under the window, and the scissors and candle holder on the table were all pushed and pulled, filmed and re-filmed by countless lenses. All of these things started to seem numb and slow.

And Kaiyin's paper-cuts! Kaiyin was like a phoenix bathing in flames. When compared to before, there were big differences in her work—she turned mournfulness into productivity, and sadness into joy—strangely, it seemed that overnight, she had become ever so worthy of compassion, ever so pitiful!

She cut out an image about infinite compassion and mercy that was meant to express her life experience. For this piece, she used a new combination of red and black. On the red half, a small woman had just struggled to give birth to a fat baby. Butterflies were fluttering everywhere, and pomegranates were bursting with seeds. But amid the joyous image of birth, the baby's long umbilical cord linked her to the black half, changing colors under the new mother's hip. In the black half, a woman suffered in a sea of black blood. It was as if her body was trapped in clouds. She stood there, her two hands reaching out and her two legs wavering, like a sick bird struggling to fly one last time.

She cut out an image of an old person making a coffin. This represented the joyous cycle of life and death in the countryside. She used a method of overlapping five colors. With the exception of the narrow, glossy black coffin in the middle, all of the funeral clothes and shoes, golden Yuan money, silver nails, copper coin strands, five grains, and paper people, were all colorful, all festive. A red light shone on the face of the old person standing to one side, watching the process of death and rebirth. He seemed satisfied when he tested his wide, five-color patterned belt.

She made a piece of a boy playing a flute. The image was full of fog, with peach flowers and willow leaves appearing indistinctly in the middle of the picture, all flourishing. The flute-playing boy only revealed half his form, including one black eye that seemed to open and close, with a golden tear dripping down.

She cut out a reunion picture with big characters inlaid with five colors. Of those characters, some she could read, and some she could not. They were big and small, all

huddling close to stay warm. Characters and words were strung together to form a story that nobody could read.

She cut out a geographic map of Tumba, with ravines, fields, people, and cow pens. It was clear that the perspective was skewed, as if one were flying into the air, into the middle of the sky, and lovingly look down at the poor earth.

She cut out a likeness of the north-facing window that had accompanied her for so many years, the snow white lattices, the lamp light gently flickering.

She cut out a picture of her palm, the lines tender and uncertain as the paths leading from her past and into her future.

So it was. Kaiyin had never said a word, but whoever saw her became aware of her thousands of words. No one could help being enchanted when following Kaiyin through her entire past, crashing into the things she had liked, the things that had made her sad, the things that she had disregarded, and the things she had dreamt.

All of the viewers were completely entranced, and could not be revived: the lonely, slow, little town, the disconsolate mute girl who had something to say but did not say it, her paper-cuts in full bloom. These were all incredible, but how does one explain such gentle harshness, such sorrowful happiness? Every person who encountered Kaiyin felt as if a bullet had been shot into the most sensitive part of the heart.

…

The appropriate department “above” saw an opportunity. They were pleased beyond expectation. They promoted Kaiyin’s work, and brought an imposing air to her story that was more in line with the style of the big capital city. A lot of fashionable words were written on the plans and the announcements: the more national, the more

global. If you want to register a trademark paper-cut, you must create a paper-cut art company, need to package and design your product. If you want to do business in cultural relics, want to head towards the international stage… Someone established a website for Kaiyin, someone professionally taught her standard sign language so that she could do interviews on television, pose for pictures with leaders, go on stage to receive awards, hold a paper-cut exhibition… lavish and tacky opportunities alike, she took them all.

It was done on a large scale, unusually large.

Even more strange and surprising reports arrived, flying in to pile on top of other dream-like news. It was said that Kaiyin would soon leave Tumba to go live in a "studio" provided by the professionals "above." What's more, this "studio" was just temporary; she was scheduled to eventually move to the provincial capital, followed by the national capital. In the future, as a "Folk Artist," she would often travel to and from foreign countries. It had even been said that some country had a disabled artist foundation, and had already sent her an invitation…

Kaiyin's life, like a piece of white rice paper suddenly touched by an ink brush, became colorful and bright. The paper was saturated to the point of breaking, and anyone who saw it would be astonished and moved. This kind of fate was gigantic, all-encompassing, and unstoppable.

Tumba residents' mouths fell half open. They would take a breath, stutter, and spread some rumors. Now, on that road, even Kaiyin's back was barely visible to them. They tenderly loved Kaiyin, and they could become broad-minded, generous, fully willing for her to strive forward, the farther the better. In the end, as long as one has prospects, everything would work out well. Their thoughts included both romantic

notions and parting sadness. While these sentiments counted for something, the townspeople eventually needed to fiercely leave them behind in their entirety…

But to tell the truth, nobody knew what Kaiyin herself really thought. Was she really willing to do what Xiaoyuan and Dayuan had done, leave friendly Tumba and transport her paper-thin body to some place thousands of miles from her hometown? By relying on her paper cuts, does she now believe that life is full, and no longer cold?

Still, nobody could really know. Kaiyin had never been a sociable person, and now, she was even less so. During her resting moments, when no one was around, she would hold that little paper sparrow in her palm and guide it along that old map, heading south for a while, then north, not knowing quite how far or how high to fly. Her small face was neither happy nor sad. She was without timidity or fear, as if she held the universe inside of her. She was majestic, estranged, distant; so far removed that she made people want to weep.

…

As it was, Kaiyin's father slowly shed some tears.

He squatted on the ground, thinking of all of these chaotic pieces of news. He mulled over each piece, but could not digest them. His face turned sallow. Is this good news or not? If she was really going to leave Tumba, would it suit her or hinder her? At this point, was she really able to minimize the effects of Dayuan and Xiaoyuan, to get rid of their memories? Her big plans, where could they lead—heavens, how far away could they lead her?

It was all too much. Kaiyin's father couldn't think it through.

Teacher Yi sat hunched on the bench where Dayuan had once like to sit, slowly helping Kaiyin's father calm down bit by bit while forcing himself to justify his thoughts. All in all, Kaiyin's life was preordained. She belonged to neither Dayuan nor Xiaoyuan, and perhaps she did not even belong to Tumba. From the time she was born, she was a person without a voice, a paper person, a celestial being, a person who would eventually have to float away.

On this day, Teacher Yi had brought along a postcard from Dayuan. Dayuan, that kind boy. He could not bear to totally disappear and make other people worry. He seemed to be somewhere looking for work, perhaps planning to stay there for a little while. The postmark was from somewhere outside of the province, but it was very unclear. Even when Teacher Yi used his magnifying glass, he still could not decipher it. "Everything is going well, please don't worry" Dayuan had written on the postcard in inelegant characters. This was just like his ordinary speech, very minimal.

Kaiyin's father grasped the thin postcard in his hand, as if holding a big, heavy dish that was hollow and echoing. He really missed that kid. His overdue tears flowed down and his throat constricted. He still wanted to follow through with a hopeless question: when are they all coming back?

Teacher Yi twisted his hand as if writing with a pen, intending to give a few deep, bright, meaningful, and extensive predictions. But all along, he could not think of anything appropriate to say.

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